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CONFLICT

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BY

Anne

CONSTANCE SMEDLEY

Armfield

Author of "An April Princess," "For Heart-o'-Gold" "

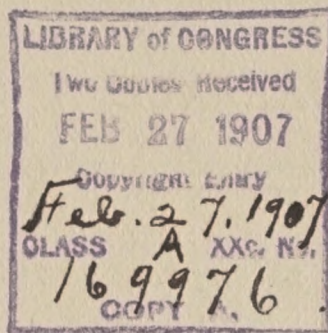
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PREFACE

It is always difficult to express thanks to one's birth-place for the qualities it bestows upon its citizens without seeming to call attention to the possession of those qualities. Yet as Birmingham does not bestow on its inhabitants the handicap of diffidence, I can unabashed confront this obstacle.

For Birmingham has a magnificently stimulating atmosphere which endows its citizens with qualities which we translate as confidence and hope and high ambition.

It is true, those who live outside that city may sneer at us as being cocksure, ignorant and insufferably conceited: but Birmingham brings us up with too sure belief in ourselves to let other folks' opinions trouble us.

And so, my city, I write a grateful eulogy of all those qualities you give your citizens. From the heart of the Midlands you send them forth into the world, surely and strongly equipped for the world-struggle. From early childhood they have breathed the spirit of

endeavour, incessant, always building, always making better, always confident. We see those citizens who rise to the heights of merchant princes devoting time and brain and fortune to the making and perfecting of their city: from the smoky bustling plain of commerce rise splendid Law Courts, Hospitals and Public Buildings, surmounted now by the great University, the finest flower of toil. And still we triumph in the fact that the Birmingham of to-day will be nothing to the Birmingham of to-morrow: for our city is the dearest ideal of those who live in it: and the pride of our city rises high in the hearts of those who issue from it.

Therefore, in gratitude for the cock-sure courage, the unlimited ambition, the aggressive endeavour, with which the city teems, a common heritage for those who spring from it I raise a small pæan of acknowledgment.

And because I love my heroine, I could think of no better city to produce her; and no better fate that could befall her than to go back to the work of city-making.

November, 1906.

CONFLICT

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CHAPTER I

"A man may pay too dearly for his livelihood."

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

THE click-click of the typewriter sounded in the distance. Overhead, the chill light of a late March afternoon filtered in through two closed and grubby skylights, while the fumes of a gas-fire lent added oppression to the atmosphere. A clerk was checking invoices with methodical swiftness: he was the only tenant of a room which bore the stamp of a private office. The roll-top desk, arm-chair, and safe gave importance to its stuffy smallness.

Presently the door flew open with a bang, and a stenographer appeared with a handful of letters. She was a smart young woman in a fussy waist and trim short skirt, and she carried the letters to the desk with provocative assurance.

"Miss van Heyten out?"

"Yes. She's gone up to Mr. Berryfield's."

"Is he better?"

"Not that I know of. He's an old man, you know: seventy if he's a day. You don't get pneumonia at that age without trouble."

"Oh, Mr. Berryfield'll last us all out!" The girl swung round with a pert toss of her head. "They say he's never missed being at the office at nine, for fifty years—wet or fine—till this knock out. Just think! Fifty years of drudgery."

"Exactly. And it's telling now. I've always said—when the governor does jack up, he'll go out altogether. He's been living on his capital. No reserve fund."

"It does seem funny without him, don't it? I can't stand seeing Miss Heyten strutting about as if the place belonged to her. How Mr. Berryfield can think so much of her I can't imagine. She's such a dowdy."

Miss Beet approached the little looking-glass which hung below the three pegs on the wall, and arranged her tie complacently.

Her companion continued his work without much attention to the radiant vision in front of him. He was used to Miss Beet's coqueties. Office work has a dulling effect on the sensibilities.

"She's a good worker," he remarked.

"Oh, it makes me sick to see her staying here when everybody else has gone! You'd think she lived on office-work. It's most unnatural. She's only twenty-four, which is very young as girls go now-a-days. Why, one's not on the shelf at twenty-nine, and we'll soon be owning up to thirty. It's seventeen that's *passée* now-a-days. Funny, isn't it, how fashions change?" Miss Beet twisted round, trying to get a good view of her back in the small compass behind her. "Though it's extraordinary how blouses last," she murmured pensively. "I don't believe they'll ever go out, do you? By the bye, if anything happens to Mr. Berryfield, we shall have to go into black!"

The thought was voiced with a fitting gravity. Her new pink blouse was very dear to Miss Beet's emotional young heart. Her hearer did not encourage sentiment.

"I don't hold with mourning," he said tersely.

"But it's such an old firm!" returned Miss Beet, now wallowing in pensive forecast. "I think it's the least that we can do, especially if we're remembered. He's just the sort to leave a mourning ring all round. I should think Miss van Heyten's certain to get something. It isn't as if he'd any family. He has nothing

but the business to take interest in. You mark my words, he'll think of us!"

Miss Bett's hopeful imaginings stopped inconsequently. The door had opened again, and a young girl was entering. It could not be claimed that Mary van Heyten was an attractive figure. Her features were finely and firmly moulded, and she had beautiful grey eyes, very frank and intense: but the slight form was hidden in garments of shapeless cut and discordant colour, a green bodice sandwiched on to a brown skirt, and surmounted by an old-fashioned black jacket which matched her sailor hat. As she walked her skirt dragged unevenly, and it could be seen that her gloves were full of holes and her boots were clumsy and needed blacking. It was obvious that Miss van Heyten had not only no taste for dress but apparently no time for it.

And yet there was a verve in the poise of her head and an assurance in her carriage which commanded instant attention. She did not droop; her gait had a spirited air which was almost a swagger. She was so unconscious of the defects of her appearance that even Miss Beet did not dare to sneer at it.

The door closed behind her, and she stood pulling the hat-pins from her hat in preoccupation. Her hair, pushed back into a loose knot, lacked even the saving grace of tidiness. Her brow was creased into a deep furrow.

Both the young man and the girl greeted her advent with awakened interest. The clerk stopped his filing. Miss Beet turned her back upon the desk and stood facing her, with the titillated demeanour which any news pertaining to serious illness brings.

"Well, is he any better?"

"No." The newcomer spoke with difficulty. Her voice was strained and husky. "There are two doctors with him. They couldn't tell me anything."

"They haven't given up hope?" Miss Beet's voice

came with eager brightness. A sudden revulsion of feeling seemed to seize the hearer, she turned almost savagely.

"Of course not!"

"Well, I'm sure!" Miss Beet retreated, injured. The clerk took up the cudgels sympathetically.

"It's a perfectly harmless question, Miss van Heyten, considering that Mr. Berryfield's past seventy——"

"He's stronger than any of us."

"Ah, but his sedentary life must tell."

The words struck on the girl's ear with disgusting unctuousness. Mr. Berryfield, whom they all had feared so, lay helpless, and like ghouls, the office slaves exulted.

"Business is all very well, but he's stuck too close to it, and he's reaping the results. You can't play tricks with a constitution and escape results."

"No indeed!" Miss Beet struck in jauntily. "I think it's simply sinful to work as Mr. Berryfield has worked. Why, life's not worth living, lived like that."

"Not worth living!"

Miss van Heyten was not in a condition to argue calmly. While it is possible to exist on thirty shillings a week and save on it, the food which that sum provides is often not the food a highly-strung girl fancies. Neither can one work fourteen hours a day without "results." Mr. Berryfield's secretary was at the stage when the slamming of a door would make her start from her chair, and the day's calculations followed her home and danced before her closed eyes even while she slept. At the present moment, her voice was shaking in a curious manner as she broke out with her answer.

"Not worth living! to have built up such a firm as Berryfield's: to have made with one's own hands with scarcely any capital a business like Berryfield's—the biggest in the tube trade? To be first of any-

thing is worth living for, and there's no one in sight of us."

The girl paused, breathless. From the deep circles round them, her eyes blazed forth furiously. Her hearer answered with irritating serenity.

"Oh, I dunno. What about Cuvier's? They're getting a lot of contracts now."

"Nothing that matters."

"I'm not so sure. From what I hear, Cuvier's pretty smart."

"Cuvier! why, he's been bankrupt." The words lashed forth.

"Ah, but he's up again. That was ages ago. I don't say he's not a bit of a gambler, but he's a big man, and now he's sound enough."

"I'm surprised—surprised!"

Miss van Heyten turned, confronting him. Her heart was nearly bursting with rage at such disloyalty. Mr. Berryfield was lying sick to death, and his own people were beginning to erect new gods and pulling at his pedestal.

Cuvier's was a younger firm which had only arisen in the last few years: it was true it was forging rapidly ahead, and of late years on one or two occasions had seriously threatened Berryfield's. It is never pleasant to feel young blood overtaking one. Berryfield's reign had been so unquestioned that any intrusion on its supremacy seemed a positive impertinence, and Cuvier's daring strokes of business were bitterly resented by the older firm. Rumours of Cuvier's personal immorality added to Mr. Berryfield's animosity against his business rival.

There are two kinds of financiers, the money-spinner and the gambler. One has the lust of acquisition, the other the lust of conflict. To the one victory is a principle; to the other, an emotion. Berryfield and Cuvier represented the two poles of temperament: personal hate was inevitable in their rivalry. Cuvier's

very name was a red rag to Mr. Berryfield; and to hear it now, sent his devoted secretary into a white-hot frenzy.

"You'll be defending his moral character next!"

Miss van Heyten's tone was not calculated to mollify her opponents. Miss Beet tiptoed daintily over to the enemy.

"His portrait's very handsome. Did you see it in last week's *Sketch*? I love that sleepy kind. And a man as rich as him, living in London too, must have such temptations," Miss Beet sighed delicately.

"Whatever he is in private life don't make him a rascal in business. The fact is, Berryfield's has had the whole field so long, Mr. Berryfield can't stand a younger man coming alongside him."

"Cuvier's will never be alongside us."

Mr. Berryfield had at least one loyal adherent in his secretary.

A girl of courage and of character, her training had developed both. Left an orphan in early childhood, a London uncle, then a young and struggling journalist, had paid for her board and education in Birmingham, choosing that city on account of the scholarships at the excellent High Schools, through which indeed Mary had considerably lessened the cost of her education. When the girl arrived at the mature age of fifteen, her uncle married. From that day she had pushed and struggled and fought her way alone.

It had been a hard fight until she had arrived at Berryfield's.

Miss van Heyten possessed divers qualities which pleased the old Quaker. Her principles were as rigid as his own: her sense of duty and of loyalty unswerving. He trusted her as he trusted no other on his staff. Her quick brain, too, attracted him: he found her judgment keen and daring.

Since his illness, she had gone daily to his house,

reported everything and received directions, returning to fulfil them, for Mr. Berryfield liked to drive alone, and there was no one but Miss van Heyten to take his place. It must be said that the young woman in question was in no way daunted by the sudden responsibility. She felt like a partner in the business: Mr. Berryfield listened to her opinion, even invited it: she knew his wishes absolutely; more, shared his ideals. The honour of the firm was as dear to her as it was to Mr. Berryfield.

Business people are not devoid of sentiment. The careless words of the clerk struck to her soul. Her sensitive face was twitching with the intensity of her emotion as she answered.

"It takes more than a few years to build up such a reputation as we've got. Our word's as good as other people's agreements. We've never had a deal which the whole world mightn't know of. There's no firm in the whole country which is so respected. Mr. Berryfield hasn't given his life for nothing. To belong to Berryfield's is something to be proud of."

The tears had started to her eyes. Ill-fed, uncouthly dressed, the working girl had a certain spiritual dignity. She was one of the drudges that pushed Life's wheel, but the glory of endeavour illumined her for one brief moment.

Then her exaltation faded: with a sudden crimsoning of countenance, she moved awkwardly to the desk, conscious of the lack of sympathy from those who heard—more of their contempt.

Miss Beet was not slow in voicing it.

"Why, you're as bad as Mr. Berryfield. If you'll excuse me, dear, you take things much too seriously. All work and no play, you know, *et cetera*. One must have some relaxation. We're made for pleasure quite as much as for work: in fact, if you're a girl, more so."

Miss Beet placed her hands on her trim waist and cast a responsive glance to admiring masculinity. Mary caught the glance. Something in her sickened at the tawdry invitation, the cheap superficiality of the flirtation.

She sat down to the desk with the decisive air that was habitual to her.

"If you don't find pleasure here, you ought to," she said tersely. "It's better to be doing things that count, than twisting round in a young man's arms at dances."

"Good heavens, Miss Heyten! You can't work day and night!" The young man spoke defensively.

"You can go home and rest, so that you're fresh for the morning's work, instead of frittering your energy in foolishness and coming half-asleep!"

Mary was sincere in her belief. Responsibility makes one strangely old. At a very early age she had summed up the worth of youth's distractions. Dances and theatres mean late hours, and late hours mean early morning headaches; country excursions mean money, which must be taken from the sick fund in the savings bank. Who but unthinking fools could take pleasure in frivolities with such inevitable consequences? Pity her not, nor blame her neither! Where other maids swayed lightly this way and that to the shrill flutes of fancy, Mary's spirit thrilled in no way to the pretty tinkling. For her, the roll of drums upon man's battle-field! Her blood danced to the grim fury of the struggle. At Berryfield's she stood close up against the whirring wheel of industry; her young strength pushed the rim. When the headaches did not come, her working days were full of joy; and even when she felt depressed and ill, there was a certain pleasure to be found in battling with Nature and winning through by sheer will-power.

But alas, for Mary's philosophy the retort was

very obvious. It came from Miss Beet's lips with astonishing pertinence.

"Well, you don't look fit for work."

"No, you're sticking at it much too hard. Every one's saying how ill you look. Do take a bit of advice now."

"I'm not ill. I'm not ill."

With blazing eyes the girl faced them. She was defending so much. This faintness that she combatted was threatening to overthrow her; it was beating at the doors. But she was holding the fortress still for Berryfield's. She would never give in—never; yet the clerks' coarse sympathy maddened her. She spoke desperately.

"When Mr. Berryfield comes back it will be all right. It's only the responsibility. If I could see him for a moment——" She broke off with a queer, dry sob. Suddenly she felt lonely. Only she in all the firm seemed to care for what *he* cared for; only she was there to guard his interests. The others grudged their time, devotion, strength—conserving such for their miserable outside lives. Mary alone gave all and held back nothing.

Miss Beet was not ill-natured. Her voice softened.

"But he mayn't be back for some time, and you have too much, really. You've been here till eleven every night this week. Why don't you leave things to Mr. Sanders?"

"Sanders is manager of the works. I'm a secretary!" The well-meant words came as fuel to the fire. Most women would have "left things" to Sanders, the active, pushing, up-to-date; only Mary knew the temptation she had fought, to "leave things" to his grasping hands! But she had kept true to her trust.

"I keep things in my hands, because Mr. Berryfield can know then exactly what has happened, and everything is then done as he wishes. Sanders would do as he thinks best. I do as Mr. Berryfield thinks best."

Loyally she held the colours: her head was aching tragically: the terrible weakness was creeping over her: every nerve was tingling. Yet she must hold on.

Miss Beet shrugged her shoulders. If Miss van Heyten chose to work herself to death, it was her look-out. She turned away with a swing of her accordion-pleated skirt.

"Oh well, it will kill you," she said flippantly. "A girl oughtn't to have such responsibility."

"It's a man's place," said her colleague with equal determination.

Mary mastered her emotion with an effort.

"Have you finished those invoices?" said she.

"Nearly."

"Finish them in the next room, then. I can't do my letters with you chattering. I'll send for you when I want you, Miss Beet. Get on with the filing."

Miss van Heyten could command authority. In another minute she was alone. She rose up quickly, and glanced at the square of glass which hung on the wall opposite. The face that looked back at her was the face of a sick person.

Poor food, close rooms, and incessant strain were routing a vigorous nervous constitution. Signs of this had not been wanting for weeks past. A growing disinclination for her untempting meals, queer shooting headaches which left perpetual heaviness as a reminder, pricking sensations which ran through her whole body to the tips of her fingers. But she had taken little heed of these signals until the sight of her lined visage woke her into consciousness.

Supposing she fell ill?

For the first time in her life fear touched her. She fought desperately: she could not be ill. There was no one who could take her place till Mr. Berryfield returned. Besides, she could not afford it. She must combat and subdue the feeling with inertness.

She fell upon the pile of letters with desperate

intensity, calling all her strength to push the panic from her, and to some extent succeeding, though the fear stayed dully in the background. When one is entirely dependent on one's own energy, the temporary loss of that energy has an appalling significance: when one has in addition an overwhelming conception of one's responsibilities, the burden becomes oppressive.

Miss van Heyten had the courage of a dozen average men; she knew she must not let her thoughts dwell on the possibilities of illness. She plunged into the contents of the pile of letters as into a douche-bath.

Half-a-dozen were read mechanically, and as mechanically dismissed. Then one arrested her attention. It was a short note, merely stating that a representative from the rival firm of Cuvier's was coming from London that day to bring a matter before Mr. Berryfield's notice, for which they must ask explanation. In the over-wrought state of the girl's mind, the letter was a menace, so unexpected and mysterious that she felt what she very seldom felt, the need of counsel.

Miss van Heyten was a young woman of prompt action. A telephone stood on the desk. In another minute she had given a number and was holding the receiver to her ear.

"That you, Mr. Sanders? I've just received a letter from Cuvier's saying there's a serious matter they must bring before our notice, and get an explanation. What? Nothing to do with you? I didn't say it had!"

A growl from the other end of the wire.

"I can't see Mr. Berryfield. If I could, I shouldn't be consulting you."

The girl's face flushed.

"I wish you wouldn't interrupt me, Mr. Sanders. I was going to tell you: Cuvier's are sending a man down to see me. Yes. Me!"

A sharp request from the unseen interlocutor.

"You? Why should I send him on to you? I can see him perfectly well. . . . I tell you, Mr. Berryfield can't be got at. There are two doctors with him now. . . . No, of course they haven't given him up; but it's impossible to worry him with this. . . . Refuse to see Cuvier's messenger? What do you think I'm here for?"

"What was that?"

The reply came stentoriously.

Miss van Heyten hung up the receiver sharply. Between her and Sanders, the manager of the works, there was an open feud. He was sharp and pushing, and bitterly resented the girls importance with Mr. Berryfield. On her side the girl distrusted Sanders: she knew that everything was not brought to her notice. Between the office and the works communication faltered, how or where it was difficult to say, but she felt the lack of loyalty. Mr. Berryfield away, Sanders had the opportunity of engaging on expeditions of his own, and Miss van Heyten scented them.

She sat still, thinking. An insignificant girl, pale of skin and sunken-eyed, with no feminine charm and grace: yet a woman, and a young woman, facing a load of responsibility which must be shouldered manfully. A woman with the dull sense of the need to live and the difficulty of so doing, with the multiplicity of cares attendant on so large a business weighing on her, with the under-current of physical uneasiness threatening her strength. Nothing romantic: only a conscientious clerk, trying her hardest to keep her head above the flood and guide her master's barque through troubled waters.

Cuvier's was threatening Berryfield's. She alone was there to defend the firm. She, unnerved and

overworked, answerable for her actions to a stern employer who could give no help.

Heroism is the most picturesque and gallant of the virtues. I claim it for this tired-out young woman when she set her lips together, drew her head up, and looked back at the office wall with eyes in which determination burned again.

CHAPTER II

"Put them in a hospital, place them in jail in yellow overalls, do what you will, young Jessamy finds young Jenny."

R. L. S.

MISS VAN HEYTEN had betrayed unwonted emotion in her conversation with her fellow-clerks. The young woman whom Mr. Cuvier's representative confronted, showed no sign of it. She was so eminently clerk-like that he hesitated on the threshold. He had come on a matter of grave importance, and had not expected to be confronted with this shabby, insignificant young girl. For the moment he did not realise that she was the person he was supposed to see.

He spoke tentatively.

"Mr. Berryfield?"

Miss van Heyten nodded curtly.

"I'm his secretary. You are from Cuvier's. We were advised of your coming by this morning's post."

Mr. Hayden Cobb still hesitated. He was a tall, strongly-built young man with deep-set eyes and a sensitive but resolute mouth. There was a quiet reserve about him which Mary resented as "superior." The indefinable atmosphere of good breeding which surrounded him, set him apart from the crudities of the office-clerks. He made no pretence of politeness nor of homage and yet there was chivalry in his bearing. It intensified her natural hostility that he had the advantage of her in manner and equipment; she felt in some way it reflected upon Berryfield's.

His words did not soothe her.

"I am afraid I must ask to see whoever is in charge."

"I am in charge."

"Of Berryfield's?"

Incredulity was written in his tone. Mary's lips compressed themselves.

"Yes. Mr. Berryfield attends to everything himself. I go to him each day to take his letters and directions. The last week he has been too ill to see me so I have had to manage by myself. There is no one else whom you can see."

The newcomer's eyes were fixed upon the girl: they were studying her anæmic face. Mary felt herself flushing under the close scrutiny. She drew herself up antagonistically.

"Perhaps you will kindly make up your mind what you're going to do as I'm busy." She put out her hand to touch the bell. A distinct smile came into the young man's eyes. He put his hat down.

"I think I had better see you then."

"Be as quick as possible, please."

Cobb measured a glance with this business-like young woman, and discovered that her eyes were grey and singularly unresponsive. Also that her square jaw belied the pallor of her complexion. He was in the presence of somebody who counted, and he was beginning to realise it.

He sat down and took out his pocket-book.

"My business is that your manager has induced our foreman to sell him certain information."

"Sanders?"

"Yes. We suspected some one was tampering with the man. Then these letters were discovered. They prove that Sanders has been buying inside information."

"There must be some mistake!"

Miss van Heyten's brow was knitted; her eyes were stern.

Cobb referred to the pocket-book.

"There is another name implicated. *Denvers*. He seems to be forming a syndicate to help you purchase something to which we have the prior claim!"

"Denvers!"

Mary laughed outright.

"I thought there was some muddle! *Denvers* help *Berryfield's*! Why, *Denvers* has nothing; he's the sort of man who 'knows people' and forms shady syndicates for highly speculative enterprises. *Denvers* help us, when we've a reserve fund of a million. Its too amusing. Really, Mr. —er—" She took up the card, and read out the name carelessly, "Cobb—if that's all you've come to tell me, I needn't detain you."

She was rising. The young man no longer saw her shabbiness. She was a power, insolent and unassailable. His lips tightened, his eyes grew steely. He had risen also.

"Will you do me the favour of looking at these please."

Mary stretched out her hand for the letters; her gaze met his, but something stabbed within her heart. Mr. Cobb's resolute demeanour also inspired confidence.

The sight of the handwriting turned her cheeks a little paler. She switched on the green-shaded desk lamp, and bent down, peering at the words. One sentence flashed out, as in characters of fire.

"I shall be seeing *Denvers* on Tuesday and will write you how far he has proceeded with our syndicate."

One may nerve oneself to meet disaster, yet when it comes the realisation is as overpowering as if it had been unexpected. There could be no doubt of the justice of the charge that *Cuvier's* had brought against them. *Sanders'* handwriting was unmistakable.

Yet that *Berryfield's* could be impugned by *Cuvier's*! She could not stop now to think of the shame of it. All her wits and strength were needed to guard

the dignity which was so seriously threatened. She raised her head with a composure which mystified the young man opposite. He did not see the clenched hands upon her knee, the force with which she kept her voice even. He was only conscious of her unshaken self-possession.

"This is a very serious matter. I must thank you for having brought it to our notice. Mr. Berryfield has been away for three weeks now——"

"Unfortunately, these letters date three months back."

She had made a gigantic effort and preserved the mask of calmness but behind it her tired brain was whirling. She did not see his meaning. She only knew she hated this quiet, self-assured young man who looked "London" all over, the corrupt extravagant London where Cuvier lived. Though she had never set eyes on the latter, she shared her employer's feeling toward him. Cuvier raced; figured at fashionable gatherings; was a personage whose doings were chronicled by the London papers. His secretary came from that world and bore its imprint. The fact that he was remarkably good-looking, and had treated her with a simple respect which she did not receive from the clerks in the office, her only men acquaintances, added to her irritation.

If he had blustered, she could have retorted; as it was, she had nothing to retaliate against.

His brown eyes regarded her very steadily as he spoke.

"You have yourself informed me of Mr. Berryfield's personal interest in his business. It is hardly likely his manager would be acting on his own initiative or at least without good grounds for thinking his proceedings would be approved."

The thunderbolt had fallen. Mary stared at him for a moment, breathless at the accusation. Then indignation gathered force and she spoke in a low voice.

"Are you suggesting that Mr. Berryfield knows anything of this?"

"There can be no doubt of it."

Mary fronted him with a calm that hid the fury of her soul. That any one should have dared to impugn Mr. Berryfield! That Cuvier should have dared to do so! It took all her power of self-control to preserve a dignified composure.

Cobb hardened his heart. He had been sent on an unpleasant mission and must go through with it. Business had prisoned youth; sexlessly, each caught up in the driving issues, man and woman faced each other.

He spoke deliberately, withdrawing nothing.

"I've proved my case. We know how bitter Mr. Berryfield is towards us. It's only natural when we're pressing him so hard."

His was the superior position now. He used it, mercilessly. The girl was stung to forgetfulness of everything but a desire to hurt the grave superiority which fronted her.

"We have our ways . . . we don't stoop to your pushing methods——"

"You stoop to something worse." Flame provoked flame, Cobb was experiencing indignation also. No word of apology or contrition had come from his opponent. His anger made the girl recall her scattered self-possession. She faced him squarely.

"I have told you we know nothing of this. Sanders resents the confidence Mr. Berryfield puts in me. He must be trying to strengthen his position. I have never trusted him. . . . But as for Mr. Berryfield countenancing such low intrigue, it's too absurd for argument."

"Mr. Berryfield is responsible for his employés."

"I have told you we are sorry."

There was little contrition in the tone. It provoked Cobb out of his usual courtesy.

"I'm sorry too. Mr. Berryfield is an old man; still when he does get in a mess he ought to face the fire or leave a man to face it. Not a girl."

Cobb had pierced the shield at last.

The interview had been hard enough; to be dismissed as unworthy of Mr. Berryfield's trust because of her sex, struck Mary as a coward's blow. She steadied herself, her hands behind her on the chair-back; her voice was quivering.

"I fail to see how that affects the question. What more could a man have done? You have tried to question Mr. Berryfield's honour. Haven't I defended it? Have I been afraid of you? Have I lied to you? I don't see why you sneer?"

"I didn't sneer. Only a man can't fight a woman. I was sent down to frighten you."

"You couldn't!" The girl's chin went upward. "You tried. You couldn't. But not because you didn't try."

"Oh come. I—I haven't been as bad as that."

"You doubted me."

"No, no. I thought, and still think, it wasn't likely Mr. Berryfield would take you into his confidence."

"You are wrong. I am the only person who shares it. There is nothing in the business I don't know. Now Mr. Berryfield's away, I manage everything. I'm more use to Mr. Berryfield than any man here. I shall see that Sanders learns a lesson. And I—yes, I—shall see that Berryfield's keeps as far ahead of Cuvier's in the future as it stands now."

Fire flashed from her eyes. The sense of power thrilled her. She could deal with issues, fight and conquer. Cobb, looking at her, felt a sudden respect, almost reverence. He had never held women of account before; this girl's personality impressed him. He admired the courage which had never faltered, the loyalty which had never failed. It seemed to him it would be good to work with a girl like that, to have

her as a friend and comrade. She was no longer unattractive. The shabby, unbecoming clothes became of trivial account beside the shining fierceness of her eyes. Yet as he looked at her, he saw the paleness of her skin, the sunken hollow of her cheek, the delicacy of her tight-clenched hands. A tide of pity swelled up within him, pity for the weakness, the lines of worry and ill-health, the strained look in the defiant eyes. He wanted to protect her, to care for her, to remove her from the responsibilities which were so great for her youth.

Something of this showed in his altered tones. He answered sympathetically.

"I am sure you will. But really we're not enemies. There's room for both of us, and I'm certain you'll see that Sanders doesn't try on any of his little tricks again."

"And that Mr. Berryfield doesn't know?"

Her eyes pleaded, waiting his answer breathlessly.

It came at last; very slowly.

"Yes. If you trust him so, I'm sure he doesn't know."

"You'll tell Mr. Cuvier?"

"I'll tell Mr. Cuvier." He took up his hat, then turned to her with the gentleness still evident in his manner.

"I'm so sorry if I've added to your worry. You do understand, don't you?" He hesitated. "Won't you shake hands?"

His well-bread air struck Mary again, and hurt her. She was suddenly aware of her poor and unbecoming clothes, her untidy hair, her inkstained fingers.

The difference between his world and hers rushed upon her; for some inexplicable reason the tears started to her eyes. She turned away quickly, feeling hopelessly unattractive, and minding it!

Besides, the iron had seared deep into her heart. For all her bravado, she knew that Berryfields's great

reputation had been clouded. She could no longer look down on other firms, glorying in Berryfield's invulnerable punctiliousness. Her heart sank at the idea of telling Mr. Berryfield.

Hayden Cobb was possessed of the old-fashioned quality of chivalry to a great degree. Now the loneliness of the tired eyes went straight to his heart. If Mary could only have known, it was just because she looked so uncared-for that she aroused his not easily-awakened interest.

"Please shake hands to show that you forgive me."

"For what?" said Mary.

The sympathy in his voice hurt her more acutely. He was pretending to treat her as a woman, she who had no time for the grace of womanhood, she who was only business, through and through. She choked back the tears, and turned brusquely, defiance in her gaze.

"Why, for—saying all the things I did."

"I haven't noticed you said anything of particular interest or importance," she replied shortly. "You can tell Mr. Cuvier the man will be spoken to. It probably will be unnecessary to explain that the guarantee of our not using any information gained by Sanders, is that we have no need of it!"

The glance that met his, said there was no need to pity her!

Yet, as Cobb made his way out of the office, rebuffed and disconcerted, he carried with him a memory of two grey eyes which repelled his sympathy—and yet which touched him strangely.

CHAPTER III

“Look, if a beggar, in fixed middle-life,
Should find a treasure,—can he use the same
With straitened habits and with mind starved small . . . ?”
R. BROWNING, *An Epistle*.

“DEATH of Mr. Berryfield.”

The stop-press edition was still wet: the boys were rushing from the printing offices, hawking their ghastly tidings through the city.

“Death of Mr. Berryfield at 6 p. m.”

That was all, and yet the one line had sent a tremor of excitement into every household, and an avalanche of horror on one.

The office was just the same: that was the extraordinary thing. Mary's gaze travelled stupidly over the rows of Blue-books on the mantelpiece: the safe: the pegs on which hung her shabby outer garments: where Mr. Berryfield's sober hat and coat had used to hang. He would never come back there. Never again would his immobile, grey, old face appear with the short nod which served as greeting.

The blank was so stupefying that it overcame all other considerations. What would become of Berryfield's was a minor thought. The only vital thing was that Mr. Berryfield had vanished from existence.

“In here, sir!”

Someone was entering: Mary awoke to consciousness. It might have been hours or minutes since the news had come while she still sat facing the problem of Sanders' disloyalty. Then the sheet had been brought in to her, and she had remembered nothing more but the one blinding fact that dwarfed all on her horizon.

She recognised Mr. Berryfield's solicitor in the new-comer. His arrival came as a relief in the appalling sense of desolation. He had been Mr. Berryfield's only friend: he had probably come to bring her work to do. Something to do, in the midst of all this chaos. Her desperation showed in her appealing eyes.

"I see you've heard!"

"Yes."

"Ah! I hoped to have got down first. Mr. Berryfield asked me to come——"

"You were with him?"

"Yes!"

"Did he . . . suffer?"

"No. passed away quite painlessly. Heart failure."

Suddenly the whole thing became more terrible. Mr. Humphry's dry words were so real. A faintness seized her. She heard someone speaking as through a dream—

"You are ill . . . brandy . . ."

Something warm and stinging was pushed between her lips; fire ran down her throat, awakening vitality and consciousness. She struggled to sit upright.

"I'm better. It's only my head. It's been worse than usual . . . I'm all right now."

She supported herself against the arms of the chair, concentrating all her will. Mr. Humphrey had come to see her: his mission was important. She could see that in his manner.

"You wanted to see me, didn't you?"

Mr. Humphry cleared his throat: he was a solid, prosperous-looking person who held a prominent position in the town and was aware of it.

"Mr. Berryfield desired me to. It is about your future."

Her future! That point had not occurred to her. Suddenly a new wave of terror rose up, leaving her breathless. Her future! With Mr. Berryfield dead, her place as secretary had gone.

"I am not to stop?"

The lawyer's keen eyes saw the ghastly whiteness: he half rose.

"Why——"

"It is nothing! I was only thinking . . . what shall I do!"

The words came in an anguished gasp.

"You have no relations, I believe!"

"No . . . that is, only one. . . . Of course, I can't expect to be kept on . . . only . . . I'm afraid I'm not up to much just now. Mr. Berryfield would have made allowances, but in a new situation——"

She put up her hand to her head, trying to hold its throbbing. A blank void stretched in front, in which there was no place for her: and she was ill, desperately ill. Her brain was dancing like a maelstrom of fire. Mr. Humphry was talking, but his words had little sense. They sounded in a confused murmur.

" . . . Highly of your capabilities . . . shared responsibilities . . . lately entire control . . . his interests yours . . . "

Out of the babble came the words—

"Berryfield's is left to you."

He had paused, waiting for her to speak. She stared stupidly; the weight of the communication was so immense, she could not realise.

Berryfield's hers.

If it had been any one but Mr. Humphry—but it was Mr. Humphry who had spoken the extraordinary pronouncement. He sat in the arm-chair, clean-shaven, broad-faced, with a sharp, over-bearing nose and a closely compressed mouth that looked capable of guarding his clients' secrets. He had a curt, snubbing way of talking which silenced most people; as a solicitor Mr. Humphry saw the seamy side of life and did not trouble to conceal his contempt for humanity. He would certainly not condescend to play tricks on it.

She strove to collect her scattered faculties: to speak reasonably, coherently.

"But surely Mr. Berryfield has relations."

"No. He was an only child and a bachelor."

"There must be some one."

"No one who can dispute your claim."

"But the charities."

"He has remembered all. He has left three millions."

"Yes."

Mary acquiesced in a whisper. The memory of Mr. Berryfield's stern old face rushed over her, oppressing her with overwhelming desolation. He had been the centre of her world. His intensity had never failed to stimulate her. Now that this pivot of her life had gone, blankness spread itself. She had no one to look up to, to serve—on rare occasions, to please.

Tears filled her eyes at the memory of the triumphant moments when Mr. Berryfield had smiled grimly at the proofs of her smartness. That Berryfield's was hers did not help her loneliness.

Mr. Humphry was continuing in his dry, phlegmatic manner.

"Mr. Berryfield was anxious you should know at once. He feared in his absence questions might have accumulated with which some one should be empowered to deal immediately. In the interest of the firm, however, he thought it wise that your position should be disclosed to no one. If customers knew a young woman was running the entire business, you might lose contracts. He has therefore simply stated in his will that he leaves his business to his partner, and signed a document stating you are that partner.

Mr. Humphry paused. He noted the slight physique, the lined forehead, the tear-filled eyes. He had no opinion of women in business. They were

too emotional. Mary van Heyten seemed to him a particularly bad type.

Mary was sensitive of his disapproval, but could not combat it. She was devitalised. Her energy had gone.

"It is a great responsibility. It will mean, of course, your entire absorption."

"I have no other interests."

Mr. Humphry put on his glasses—

"You look far from strong."

"It's only my head."

She could talk no more: she could not even think. The room was rising and falling, giddily. She tried to rise, and the table receded from her grasp.

Berryfield's was hers. Its whole responsibilities, its cares, its endless call on time and energy were hers: they had descended on her in a huge cloud which was settling more heavily each minute. There was no one but her to bear the brunt of everything. Supposing that she failed? Supposing she could not hold up the load? She put out her hand searching blindly for some help.

There was so much to do and she could not do it. Sanders! Who was to dismiss Sanders? Somebody must. She tried to speak, to tell Mr. Humphry before the awful cloud descended. It was descending—cloud and fire, burning, blazing fire that sent flames whirling before her eyes and through the pain-racked head. Some one was speaking, holding her. She did not hear. Darkness had come, and merciful oblivion.

Whimsical is Fate. At the moment when the firm of Berryfield's was hers, when she must enter on her trust and guard the honor dearer to Mr. Berryfield than his grey life, Miss van Heyten was removed quickly and neatly from the scene of action. In other words, Mary lay prostrate with brain-fever.

CHAPTER IV

"Let a man contend to the uttermost
For his life's set prize, be it what it will."
R. BROWNING, *The Statue and the Bust.*

MR. CUVIER was smoking an after-dinner cigar in his customary leisurely manner. A man of power, unmistakably, as he lay back in his chair, broad-shouldered, lean-flanked, emphatically vigorous. There was an arrogance of strength in the square jaw and sleepy, penetrating eyes. A fair skin and fair hair gave him a falsely youthful appearance, belied by the net-work of wrinkles round his eyes. A wisp of hair had a habit of falling over his forehead, giving him a rakish, unkempt look. There was a carelessness about his manner which irritated men and which women found fascinating.

He was waiting for Cobb's return from Birmingham. There were various matters he wanted to discuss with him. The smoke came from between his lips in intermittent puffs. He was revolving new moves for the morrow's game. All his interest was concentrated on the fighting line, though his emotions were almost impossible to arouse. He accepted defeat with shrugged shoulders, there were always fresh goals to aim at. Not a self-sacrificing man, but one who would do unexpected acts of justice, even kindness. A man who would have no scruples in kicking off impediments if he felt them clog. A man who inspired extraordinary confidence and loyalty in those within his personal radius, and was detested by those outside.

Not a pleasant enemy; not a man in whom a

woman would be wise to place her trust. As he lay, lost in thought, the cruelty of his mouth was evident. Thin-lipped and hard as iron, it cut his face like a curved whip-cord. There was neither tenderness nor mercy in his eyes. Woe betide weakness, if it came near Simeon Cuvier.

He lifted his eyes to greet his secretary's advent with a nod.

"Well?"

"Berryfield's dead!"

"What?"

"Died at six this evening. I saw it on the placards as I got into Euston."

"You didn't see him, then."

"No, sir."

Cuvier stretched out an authoritative hand for the paper which Cobb held.

"'Death of Birmingham's leading manufacturer. Munificent benefactor of his city. Monument of integrity.' Dear, dear, how well we look in our obituaries. I wish we could have got home on the old rogue first. I had appreciated the idea of laying a paternal finger on Mr. Berryfield's weak spot!"

His hearer winced; the news had sobered Cobb. Ever since he had heard it, his thoughts had been haunted by a girl's face, pinched, worried, desperately plucky. The news would mean much to her, fighting so hard for Berryfield's—Berryfield's whose honour had been impugned for the first time in the firm's history that afternoon by him. Now, death had cut the knot, and the reign of Mr. Berryfield was over. It was with an odd desire to please her that he spoke.

"Mr. Berryfield had nothing to do with the matter."

"Eh. You said you hadn't seen him."

"I saw his secretary. She assured me this was the first they had heard of Sanders' action, and I am sure she spoke the truth."

"She—she?"

There was a questioning humour in Mr. Cuvier's voice which brought a flush to the young man's brow. Hayden Cobb came of soldier ancestors. He stood to his guns.

"Yes, sir. Sanders is the manager of the works. The business is run from the office and this girl seems in charge of the whole show."

"Sounds a capable person. What sort of girl?"

"Very plucky, sir: clever too."

"Pretty?"

"I didn't notice."

"And that was all you saw?"

"Yes, sir. She represents Mr. Berryfield when he's away."

"She told you so, I presume?"

Again Cobb flushed; he kept silence with difficulty.

"And you believed all she told you?"

Cobb faced the battery of Cuvier's half-shut glance.

"Yes, sir, I wasn't certain if Mr. Berryfield was as ill as they made out, or whether she was simply shielding him from the unpleasantness; but now, I believe what she said."

"I am only asking," said Mr. Cuvier moving his foot thoughtfully over the pattern of the carpet, "because I thought you an unimpressible person, Cobb, and it worries me to see that you are human."

There was only one point which marred Cobb's respect for his master: that was Cuvier's attitude to women. Cobb did not pose as a moralist, but he hated Cuvier's commerce with the impudent little chorus girls. Women were the slightest of side-issues in Cuvier's life, he patronised the vaudeville belles because he found them the most amusing and least exacting species of the sex, and bought them frankly. But the society of the *coulisses* does not ennoble man's ideals of womanhood.

Tonight, Cuvier's tone struck Cobb more disagree-

ably than usual. His chivalry flamed up to protect the girl he had battled with.

"I am afraid I don't understand you, sir. I could not see Mr. Berryfield, so I saw his secretary. I am sure that the girl I interviewed is equal to dealing with any one." Cobb spoke with a resolution which would have flattered Miss van Heyten could she have heard him.

"Tush. I wanted you to scare the man who wrote those letters so that he wouldn't dare try on the trick again; and you've done absolutely nothing except receive assurances of everybody's innocence from a woman whom you've been fool enough to believe."

"Wait a minute, sir. I did not believe sufficiently. If I had accepted Miss van Heytens word as to Mr. Berryfield's health, and ignorance of the matter, I should have gone straight off to Sanders and had it out with him. If it weren't for the fact that everything will be sixes and sevens, I should go back now."

His straight eyes met Cuvier's with a look that routed the smiling cynicism. Cuvier was not annoyed. A very kindly look came into his face as he confronted Cobb. He appreciated his clean honour though it amused him to mock at it.

Cobb was the only living creature for whom Cuvier entertained the slightest affection. He had discovered him in his own office, where the lad's unusual refinement struck Cuvier; the stamp of the public school is not to be mistaken. Inquiry elicited that Cobb was a Winchester boy, had left of his own accord, and was supporting himself. A curious look of endurance in the young face seemed to indicate that the process was not an easy one.

The staff spoke well of Cobb. He was intelligent, his whole heart was in his work, and his only drawback appeared to be an impenetrable reserve. All these qualities Cuvier thought good ones. He took the boy into his private office.

When, some years later, Cuvier discovered his history, he was struck by the boy's grit in having kept it to himself. It would have been so easy to have told Cuvier and enlisted his certain sympathy. But he had chosen to fight through alone.

Cuvier believed in few people and respected less. Cobb had both his trust and his respect.

"So we can leave things to the young woman at Berryfield's?"

"I don't say that, sir," Cobb returned. "I've been wondering if Sanders has got wind of the patent. The foreman has obviously sold him information of importance."

"But you're the only person who's in the secret!"

"I know, sir. I'll tell you what's put it into my head."

Cobb looked round for a seat, and pulled a chair up. He sat down, leaning forward, his hands clasped between his knees. The firelight shone upon his clear-cut features, serious with the shadow of his suspicions. It was the face of a grave young knight, austere, restrained and earnest. Behind him the great room stretched away into mysterious darkness. The light flickered on books in far-away recesses, discovering them capriciously. The window framed vistas of the park, its leafless trees illuminated by the faint light of the stars. Outside, the world lay still, night-enfolded. Within the room men thought and toiled, still goaded by the God of labour.

"Go on."

Cuvier had risen, and stood before the mantelpiece. His hands were behind his coat-tails, his cigar between his teeth. His shoulders half-obscured the row of photographs which flaunted in a shameless line among the pipes and books. Each bore a personal scrawl. They represented the recent favorites.

"In the last letter, Sanders said he couldn't make the final offer till he had seen Denvers. Now this girl

says Denvers is only a shark with a knack of forming syndicates. And we know ourselves if Sanders is purchasing information for Berryfield's, Berryfield's could pay for it: but Mr. Berryfield's secretary says she and Berryfield knew nothing of this. It looks more and more as if Sanders is playing his game alone. If so, information about the patent would be the only information worth anything to him."

"Sanders *can't* buy the patent. We've a six months' option."

"But we shan't close till we've tested the process: the tests mayn't be finished in six months. We may want to renew our option."

"There'll be no trouble about that. The inventor's safe in Dalmatia. No one knows his name or location, except you and me."

"There were labels on that last packing-case."

Cuvier was playing with one of the photographs. The light gleamed on the pouting lips and rounded innocence of the newest chorus girl. At Cobb's words he straightened himself up, and tossed the picture brutally into the fire. Miss Billie Button's youthful softness suddenly annoyed him.

"Well, well, well. It isn't fatal if Sanders does get his dirty little nose upon the scent. We've six months."

"We don't know what he may do in six months. He has obviously got spies in our works."

"I'm not going to pay ten thousand now, if that's what you're driving at. The process may turn out worthless. If it's what its inventor claims, I'll have it: but I'll test it fully if I have to wait a year. It's all right Cobb. There's sense in what you say, but there's no need to get panicky: it's the first step to getting rushed."

Cobb still sat, looking at the fire. His brow had cleared no whit.

"I wish I knew what information Sanders is buying.

Dismissing a foreman's not going to help us. I'm not suggesting that we keep him: but dismissing him only sends him openly to Sanders' camp: and he's very popular with the men. He can tap them still. We can't guard the tests; we must have workmen."

"Look here. Can anything be done?"

"That's the worst of it! I don't see that anything can be."

"Then let the worry slide. Life's a gamble. We've got to take its chances."

"I don't like chances."

Cuvier dropped the end of his cigar, and pulled his waistcoat down with decision.

"We're safe enough. Old Berryfield was the whole thing, and he's dead. Sanders or any other little ant in his employ, don't count. Now old Berryfield is cleared out, there's not another firm to threaten us. We have the whole show; and when we've got this patent, we have the tube trade in our hands. Don't worry another minute! Be at the office early. I've a lot of letters."

"Very good, sir."

"I've got to go down to the House about the turbine contract. Are you coming my way?"

They stood in the portico, looking forth, while Cuvier lighted a cigarette. There was a dinner at the German Embassy, and motors were whizzing up, to convey their owners homewards. The dark street was full of traffic. Overhead the stars glittered in a dazzling galaxy. The night was frosty and the footsteps of the passers-by rang sharply on the pavement.

Cuvier's car was waiting: they got into it and whirled toward Westminster. Cobb's glance rested on the powerful hand that held the wheel: strong, sinewy, relentless. His confidence returned to him. Cuvier could be trusted.

The swift, smooth motion calmed his troubled mind.

As they sped on through the mighty roar of the city, the provinces seemed to recede far into the background and to become of infinitesimal importance.

After all, old Berryfield was dead: only Cuvier was left, very vigorously alive.

CHAPTER V

“For marriage is like life in this—that it is a field of battle and not a bed of roses.”

R. L. S., *Virginibus puerisque*.

THE morning sun streamed in on the Ellestrees' breakfast-table. The room was large and comfortably furnished, a chesterfield stood at right angles to the fire-place whose cushioned fender-seat invited occupancy. There were plenty of book-shelves, and a profusion of flowers—roses, lilies, violets—though it was early spring. The few prints on the walls were in excellent taste. It was a restful room, not too artistic to be comfortable, and yet harmonious. A room that was lived in; and pleasant to live in also.

The lamps beneath the coffee-machine and the chafing-dish had been burned for some little time before the door opened to admit the first arrival. That was a stoutish man, unshorn and slippered, whose khaki dressing-gown did not improve the natural yellowness of his complexion. Tom Ellestree was a typical press-man of the old régime, a Bohemian to his tobacco-stained finger-tips. In privacy he had no regard for appearances, and the addition of a dressing-gown to his pyjamas seemed to him to meet all the requirements of the breakfast hour. His breakfast and the morning's news were the sole objects of his existence at this moment, not his æsthetic possibilities!

His pipe was in his mouth already, and the smoke puffed across the breakfast-table as he poured out his coffee, stood over the chafing-dish and helped himself

untidily from its contents, and finally sat down at the place which a pile of newspapers and letters reserved as his. He drank noisily while he tore open the letters.

"Susan!"

"Hullo!"

"Aren't you coming?"

"Why? Do you want me?"

The door pushed open again and a woman looked in, brush in hand. She was partly dressed and her hair hung in pretty masses on her shoulders. She had a graceful, well-developed figure which looked charming in its white petticoat and fine lawn camisole through which her flowered silk corsets showed. If Mr. Ellestree lacked in his devotion to the more private details of his toilette, Mrs. Ellestree compensated by her punctilious daintiness.

"I've had a letter about that niece of mine."

"A niece, Tom? I didn't know you had one."

"Yes. Brought her up. Father and mother died when she was a kid and I was the only one who'd got enough oof to keep her. I put her in a family in Birmingham. Good school there."

"And have you been helping her all these years?"

Mrs. Ellestree was more accustomed to her husband's reticence than to evidence of such generosity. She came a little further into the room. Her face showed that she was both surprised and touched.

"Oh lord no. Only kept her till she could support herself. She got herself a berth when she was fifteen, thank goodness. It was a bit of a struggle in those days to keep myself, let alone a growing girl."

"I think it was splendid of you. Why don't you tell me these things."

Susan put her arms about her husband's shoulder. He moved away.

"Nothin' to tell. Your breakfast 'll be cold."

"You're not an affectionate husband, Tom."

Tom unfolded the newspaper.

"Put your hair up and sit down. Here! Take the letter. It's from the solicitor of the firm she works for. She's had brain-fever and is ordered six months rest."

"Good gracious! Does that mean we have got to have her?"

"Suppose so. Get dressed."

Susan took the letter and went out reading it. When she returned, her husband had finished and was sending clouds of smoke across the table. She laid her hand upon his shoulder good-temperedly as she gave him back the letter.

"Poor girl; she seems to have had a bad time of it. I should think I'd better go down and arrange for her to stay somewhere. There must be plenty of convalescent homes for cases of this kind."

Susan took her seat behind the coffee-machine. She had slipped into a fresh white wrapper, tied with a big blue bow beneath her arms. An embroidered muslin collar gave her an early-Victorian look which was enhanced by the simplicity of her hair, rippling over the temples and brushed smoothly into a knot behind. She looked eminently womanly and comforting. There was a wise serenity of atmosphere emanating from her. Close observation might have perceived a certain dominance in the blue eyes and rather large aquiline nose, but the warmth of her heart and the frank honesty of her nature made people forgive her motherly autocracy.

She drank her coffee and lighted a cigarette. It was impossible to eat breakfast in the fumes of Tom's tobacco. She leaned her elbows on the table, the cigarette between two daintily manicured fingers.

"Well, Tom?"

Tom put down his newspaper and tapped his pipe upon the breakfast-cloth.

"Oh Tom, Tom! Do use a plate!"

In spite of her philosophy which accepted her husband's ways, as irrevocable, Susan Ellestree was moved, sometimes to housewifely annoyance.

Her husband began to clean his pipe unheeding.

"She's coming here."

"But there isn't a room!"

"She can have mine."

"And where will you be?"

"America."

"*America!*"

"Yes. I am going at the end of this month."

"For how long?"

"Oh, I dunno. Three months. Perhaps longer. Can't tell till I get there."

Mrs. Ellestree kept silence while she struggled for serenity. She had been married for seven years and had not yet become immured to her husband's reticence. She had learnt by bitter experience she must not show any resentment, however, and when she spoke, her voice had regained its normal calm.

"When did you know?"

"Oh, I dunno. Some time ago."

Susan rose abruptly and walked to the fire-place. It was hard to maintain composure. She was successful in controlling herself. She turned round frankly.

"Tom, couldn't I come too? I'd love it so. I've longed to go to America all my life and I can amuse myself. I shouldn't be a worry to you."

Mr. Ellestree was relighting his pipe; he concluded the operation without excessive haste, then lay back, sucking at it. He was not a beautiful object.

"Out of the question!"

The finality of his tone showed that dispute was hopeless; yet Susan could not see this desire abandoned without a struggle.

"Why! I could be so useful packing and attending to your things; and I wouldn't expect to be taken about. I can't stop here alone; people will say such

things. You really ought to take me there with you. There's no reason why you shouldn't!"

"Yes there is. I may be only there for a few weeks and have to race all over the country. It wouldn't be worth the expense. Besides, there may be a big opening out there and I must be free or I shan't do myself justice. If I stay, of course I'll send for you. But I can't risk taking you and having you on my hands. Business is business."

Susan swallowed down her disappointment. Tom had spoken quite reasonably, and with more consideration than his wont. He did not often condescend to explanations.

Still, being human, in spite of her philosophy she could not, nor did she try to, suppress an acerbity which had been lacking in her tone before.

"What are you going to do about the flat?"

"'Fraid I shall have to keep it on. I've been seeing if I could get out of the lease, but it doesn't look likely. Besides, you'll have to live somewhere."

"Still I don't know that I should choose to live in London all the summer when there's no need to."

"I thought of that. Perhaps you can let the flat later. In the meantime—and there'll be my room to spare—you'd better have this girl up, Mary."

"Your niece! The typewriter!"

Surprise precluded comment. Mrs. Ellestree's eyes were turned in cold amazement on her husband.

"Yes." Mr. Ellestree's jaw stiffened in a way which foretold trouble. "You can't be here by yourself. You must have some woman with you. This girl has money of her own now, and can pay her share of the expenses."

The concluding argument was a sound one. Mrs. Ellestree was forced to admit it, albeit unwillingly. She was an extravagant woman and money was of considerable moment in their menage.

"It will be a great bore."

Mr. Ellestree was collecting his letters; he rose with them, and made a ponderous exit towards the bedroom, his dressing-gown flapping untidily about his heels.

"You must have a woman with you, Sue," he repeated. "I know you'll be up to no harm, but other people don't; and I don't choose that my wife shall be talked about. Just write to this man Humphry and tell him we'll take her for two pounds a week, this day fortnight. I don't see any point in your going down to Birmingham. It's too big a fare."

The door closed and Mr. Ellestree proceeded to the later details of his toilette.

Mrs. Ellestree remained where she was, her chin upon her clasped hands, her elbows on the table. Her sleeves were tucked above her elbow, milkmaid fashion, and showed two charming arms. Her full bosom rose and fell rather tumultuously beneath its transparent muslin covering. A discontented shadow rested in the blue eyes; the lips had hardened disagreeably.

Mrs. Ellestree was face to face with her position in life, and she did not like the sight of it. When one has a soul attuned to all the dancing glory of the world, it is hard to be continually thrust back into its sordidity. It seemed to Susan that her whole life was one of visions seen behind impenetrable bars. She longed for beauty, comfort, change—all the glorious things that money sets free; and she was locked in a tiny flat, the chattel of a commonplace, indifferent husband.

She struggled to build her life into contentment; but every now and then the edifice would totter. Tom was not an ideal companion, but she would miss him dreadfully. She would have nothing to live for with him away. Susan was the genuine mother-woman; she must have some one dependent on her care, or life seemed purposeless.

And she wanted so passionately to see America. It had been her dream from girlhood, when she and her little brother read of the wonderful homage men paid to women there. Ferroll had longed to go and make his fortune. Fortunes were made so easily in America. She had longed to go to be treated as a goddess. They had planned that Susan should marry some one who would take them.

Now the dream had come half-true, as dreams have a knack of doing. Her husband was going; but she must stay behind. Susan drew a deep sigh and pulled her philosophy around her. It was no good worrying about what could not be helped. She must hope that Tom would get on, and would send for her. He was clever in his own line and would probably succeed.

Susan was used to putting her own wishes on one side in obedience to the desires of other people. She had brought up a brother with an artistic temperament, and had married a husband who had the habits of a confirmed bachelor. The brother held woman in idealistic reverence, the husband despised them; as both brother and husband shared the belief in the Godhead of man, the result came to much the same for practical purposes. As sister and wife Susan had had excellent practice in reunuciation.

She rose and began to put the breakfast things upon the tray, ready for the maid to carry to the kitchen. She was interrupted by an early morning visitor. It was Rosalys Benton, her closest woman friend.

"I couldn't help dropping in!"

"My dear, what an age since I've seen you! How well you're looking! When did you come back?"

"Yesterday."

"Good tour?"

"Perfect. *Wonderful* notices and such houses!"

Rosalys sank upon the sofa, casting back her furs.

She was a big woman, with a Greek face and the heart of a child. She was so emotional that life would have been impossible had she any imagination. Fortunately for her this was entirely lacking.

She lived in the moment, adored food, clothes and flowers, fell in love at a minute's notice, and had only one fear in the world, that of getting fat.

She had had two husbands who had been "brutal" to her, but had been "good fellows" and allowed her to divorce them. She upheld marriage, as the most comfortable condition in a foolishly censorious world. She had not left the path of respectability by any means and loved being seen with Mrs. Ellestree who was conveniently broad-minded and yet unimpeachably domestic.

Rosalys, in short, belonged to the class of actress who is still on debatable ground, whose friends can defend them with a certain percentage of honesty, and whom people ask to their houses and gossip of behind their backs. She shared the picture-postcard record with Gaiety beauties, and drew a large salary for appearing in parts where she had to be maternal or passionate in Paquin gowns.

Rosalys' volcanic friendship was one of Mrs. Ellestree's chief pleasures. Round her was the sensuous easy atmosphere for which Susan's soul hungered. Money was plentiful with Rosalys and she spent it abundantly. Her parties at the smart hotels were famous.

She was equally bountiful with her affection: and to Susan, affection was the breath of life. She knew that Rosalys lavished as warm caresses on her spaniel as on her, but she was not critical where love was concerned. She never met Rosalys without feeling warmed and cheered.

"And how's Tom?"

"Very well. He'll be in directly. He's going to America."

"America! Oh, Sue! How lovely for you! You'll adore it."

"Oh, but I'm not going. It's only a business trip."

"But he ought to take you with him. He must. You must make him!"

"I'm afraid I can't. There are several reasons why I have to stay at home. Tom has a niece who has had brain-fever and whom he wants me to look after. He brought her up when she was a child, and he was a boy struggling to make his living. You know, one never knows how good Tom really is."

When the record of Susan Ellestree's faults and virtues is written up, I think the recording angel will outweigh all the faults for that one rare virtue, loyalty. Those who depended on Susan might trust in her unwavering championship, however badly they behaved—even to her. Tom was a selfish and indifferent husband, but not one of Susan's friends had ever heard her breathe a word against him. When they did, as Ferroll said, Susan would not be Susan.

"But you aren't going to be saddled with an invalid?"

"Poor girl: she has no one to look after her but us. She's earned her own living ever since she was fifteen. She's been a typewriter."

"Oh, my dear, how awful. She's not going to come here?"

"Yes. She'll have Tom's room when he goes."

"Well, I've always said you're an angel, Sue, but this beats everything. I loathe those working women, their hair is done so badly and they look so intelligent."

Mrs. Ellestree bit her lips. Tom's niece belonged to his camp and she must protect her.

"Don't be so silly, Rosalys. What are you but a working woman?"

"The stage is different. I'm an artist. Just imagine if the girl was anything like Tom!"

"You are speaking of my husband, Rosalys."

"I know, pet. It's a shame, but I can't help it!" Rosalys swooped across the hearth-rug and threw herself on her knees by Mrs. Ellestree's chair. She put her arms about her, looking up with adoring appreciation.

"You sweet, darling thing! It's wicked for you to be wasted on a man like Tom. Yes, wasted. It's a crime that you haven't a devoted husband. You know Tom isn't that. He hasn't the æsthetic sense to admire you as you ought to be admired. The life you're leading is wicked and unnatural. He doesn't satisfy your nature. I see it in your eyes. They're starved for want of love. Oh, Susan, if you could only meet a man who really loved you!"

"You seem to overlook the fact that I'm married to Tom."

"Other women have been married unhappily, and have found a way out."

"I'm afraid I'm not that sort of woman. Besides, I'm not unhappily married as marriage goes. Tom gives me everything he can."

"Except love."

"My dear, all temperaments aren't as emotional as ours. Tom has very little passion in his nature, and what intensity he has goes into his work. Tom is a very good husband to me."

"Why, I've never seen him kiss you!"

"Kisses aren't everything. If I were ever in trouble I should always go to Tom. Think how wonderful he's been to Ferroll. Very few men would have opened their homes to their wife's brother as Tom has opened his to Ferroll. I shall always be grateful to him for that. As for affection: I know he's not demonstrative, and don't expect it from him. We can't have everything we want."

"Oh, be honest, Sue! Is there anything you want except love—real, satisfying, man's love? Kisses

aren't everything? They mayn't be, but they're the things a woman wants most—to be *kissed* by a man who loves her.”

“Hush, Rosalys! I must be content with my life as it is. For one thing, I must keep a home for Ferroll. As long as I'm married to Tom, he'll always have one.”

“You are good, Sue. You live for other people.”

“Nonsense! Ferroll is more like my child than a brother. He needs me so.”

“What's he doing now?”

“I don't know. I haven't heard from him for nearly a year. But he'll walk in some day when he's down on his luck and wants help and comfort. He's writing now. I read a charming story of his in last month's *Scribner's*. He is improving so. I am certain he'll do something big one day. After all, he'll only twenty-six.”

“Excuses for every one. Ferroll's behaved disgracefully to you after all you've done for him.”

“Hush! Ferroll's sacred. I won't let any one say a word against him. His faults are the faults of his temperament. He wouldn't be Ferroll if he wasn't his own free self.”

“Well, I can surely speak of him, considering what Ferroll and I have been to one another. If I saw him again I should adore him just as much. He's so full of youth! Oh, Susan, isn't it awful to think of getting old? Elsie says my waist has spread an inch. What am I to do? I'm eating raw meat now, and drinking four pints of hot water daily. I shall die of it!”

“You look very well!”

“But I feel . . . ugh! What do you do to keep your figure? It's exquisite! I'd give anything to be as supple and strong as you. It's wicked for you not to have a lover—a real . . . *man* . . . who

had strength enough to care madly for you . . . not a frog-minded tape-machine like . . . ”

“Sh!”

Tom was entering, tail-coated and hatted. He bestowed a curt nod on Rosalys, and demanded the clothes-brush. Susan accompanied him into the hall and found it for him.

“Shall you be home to dinner?”

“Yes.”

“What time?”

“Can’t say.”

“About eight?”

“You’d better have it ready before that.”

“Half-past seven?”

“I can’t say exactly. Don’t keep me waiting, that’s all; and don’t let it be cold!”

Tom departed, having left this easy, wifely task. Susan closed the door on him with her customary philosophy. Husbands must be accepted with the other ills of life!

There was a distinct relief in the atmosphere on Tom’s departure. Rosalys acknowledged it without ado.

“That’s a comfort. Now you can come off with me. We’ll lunch at the Savoy. They have a new *chef*, who they say’s a dream of joy!”

“I’d love to come.”

The two women went into Susan’s bedroom while she changed into a walking-frock. Rosalys threw herself into the arm-chair, languorous and lovely, her sables sweeping round her. Mrs. Ellestree regarded her somewhat curiously as she unfastened her wrapper.

“Happiness is very unequally divided. You never want anything, do you, Rosalys?”

“Oh, my dear!” Rosalys lifted her muff into the air tragically. “Want anything! I am consumed with longing at the present moment. I am pining for a man whom I can never have—an impossible

brute, whom I ought to hate. I met him last night—Simeon Cuvier.”

“Cuvier?” Mrs. Ellestree put herself into a short skirt thoughtfully. “Ought I to have heard of him?”

“My dear, you must have done! He’s the man who gave Billie Button her pearls and that gorgeous Panhard. Isn’t it wicked what these vaudeville housemaids get! Men never spend anything on us. I’m sure I’ve told you about Cuvier. He was the wretch that did for poor little Carrie Ray. I heard the story from herself. I’ll tell it you some day. He’s a perfect devil, but the most magnetic creature you ever saw, with those fascinating eyes that won’t open properly, and a wicked smile in the corners of his mouth. My dear, he’s *so* magnetic, that, knowing all I know of him, I’d give anything in this world to have that man love me.”

Mrs. Ellestree adjusted a neat bow beneath her chin, smiling quietly.

“You probably will effect it, with a little perseverance.”

“Oh, my dear, he won’t trouble to make love to any one but a chorus girl or housemaid: he never will take on a woman who has any intelligence!” Rosalys possessed a great store of unconscious humour. As a “star” of no small dimensions, she considered herself as a priestess of the sacred flame of Drama, and spoke and thought of her “Art” as seriously as of her gowns or dinner. “No, I did all I knew, I assure you, and left him as cold as I found him. He’s inhuman.”

“I should like to meet him.”

Mrs. Ellestree took up her muff, and they went downstairs. Rosalys’ victoria was waiting, luxuriously rugged and cushioned. Mrs. Ellestree lay back with a contented sigh. The wind blew on her face refreshingly.

"Life is a lovely thing," said she. "Oh, Rosalys, every one's cup must be held out once to them."

Rosalys put out her hand impulsively.

"Be brave enough to drink," she said. "I'm taking a bungalow at Cookham this summer. Tom will be away. You shall come down and meet people."

"The niece will be here, though."

"She can come as well. I must have you. You shall have a summer, Susan. You *shall* have a summer!"

"You are a silly woman, Rosalys," said Mrs. Ellestree, with truth.

CHAPTER VI

"Watch out thy watch."

R. BROWNING.

Two women lingered over dinner, coffee in translucent cups before them. The older woman was smoking, and the blue wreaths circled about her head, like incense round a goddess.

Mary van Heyten was gazing at her with frank admiration. Mrs. Ellestree was a revelation to the business girl.

Mary had arrived at the flat the day after her uncle's departure for America. She was slowly recovering. Responsibility had vanished from her immediate vision; she had sense enough to realise that she must obey the doctor's mandate and give up work and worry till her health was restored. Mrs. Ellestree's ignorance of her position helped her. Mary found herself looked on as a lonely little clerk, who must be comforted and gently educated in life's refinements. It was so refreshingly novel to be taken care of that Mary bowed to Mrs. Ellestree's rule without much demur. For one thing, she was physically and mentally exhausted; for another she must carry out Mr. Berryfield's obvious wish and preserve the secret of her position; and lastly Mrs. Ellestree had captured her fancy utterly.

The women were mutually attracted. Though their temperaments were widely different they recognised like qualities of honesty and frankness in one another.

Besides Mrs. Ellestree missed Tom more than she had expected: she found that custom had made his surly voice and untidy habits not only bearable but dear; she felt a blank, and Mary helped to fill it, while Mary's vivid interest in everything in the new life, the freshness of her zest for London, the brightness of her intellect made ciceroneship a pleasure, and Mary's independence and her indifference to the world's conventions intensified the flattery of the girl's unstinted homage.

As for Mary, she had never met a woman to whom womanhood was a calling in itself: Mrs. Ellestree was a mistress of the art. Her elegance was a source of constant surprise and pleasure. For in the world which Mrs. Ellestree inhabited, the æsthetic side of life seemed to be of paramount importance: emotions blossomed beautifully as roses. Here pleasure was everybody's lode-star: in Mary's world, duty and necessity drove pleasure from one's vision. A world full of luxury, idleness, and warm affection, where Mary's nature unfolded unexpectedly, developing both tenderness and gaiety. The girl who sat at the dinner-table was not the girl who worked a typewriter at Berryfield's. Her face, still pale, was full of awakened vitality. The worried lines were smoothed away; her mouth had softened, her eyes brightened.

They were both enjoying the peace of the *tête-à-tête*.

Mrs. Ellestree was the first to speak.

"Well, what are you thinking of?"

Mary came back with a start and a sigh.

"I was wondering how long it would be before I could go back to work."

"Isn't that the forbidden subject?"

"I can't help worrying sometimes."

"Which is why you fell ill. Women have no sense of proportion: that's why they're so unfitted for a business life."

"But I am fitted for one. Eminently!" Mary's chin tip-tilted controversially.

"Hush, hush, hush!" Mrs. Ellestree lifted her hand in firm reproof. "You know what the doctor said. Three months' perfect rest; and if you aren't good it will be longer."

Mary half-bit her lip, then her common-sense reasserted itself.

"I will try: only it seems so wrong to be doing nothing but enjoy myself."

"You are learning a great deal also. Do you know you might become a most charming girl?"

The news did not bring the pleased blush to Mary's cheek which Mrs. Ellestree expected.

If Mrs. Ellestree were strange to Mary's ken, Mary was an equally new experience to Mrs. Ellestree. She in her turn had never met a girl with no vanity at all about her personal appearance. Mary treated the question with absolute indifference as if charm were not for her, and so she did not trouble about it.

"Don't you want to be charming?"

"Oh, I dunno!" Mary leaned her chin on her hand, her eyes full of thought. It occurred to Mrs. Ellestree that Mary did possess a certain attraction. The square chin and clearly chiselled nose gave her a look of resolution which was deepened by the widely set grey eyes, brave and staunch under the level brows. Her mouth had a serious expression, as though the girl were driving untold forces back—an interesting face to watch; to provoke; to soften.

"There are lots of other things I want to be."

"What?"

"Brave; clever; self-reliant; strong; successful." Mary's ideals came forth in a clipped fashion.

"You can be all these things and still be charming."

"I suppose so; but being charming seems the least important." Mary straightened herself from

her abstraction and found Mrs. Ellestree smiling in rather an amused fashion.

"Have you ever been in love, Mary?"

The colour which rushed to the girl's face showed that Miss van Heyten was not experienced in the sentiment.

"Good gracious, no."

"Has any one ever been in love with you?"

"I shouldn't think so." Mary's tone was frank in its contempt. "I always kept out of the office foolishness."

"That explains a good deal," said Mrs. Ellestree quietly.

Mary fidgeted. She felt she had been tried in the balance and found wanting. Secretly, she entertained a great respect for Mrs. Ellestree's opinion. They were wholly novel opinions; but they seemed to have wisdom in them. Presently the flag came down with a jerk.

"How do you mean . . . charming?"

"By being pleasant to look at, for one thing."

"I can't help my looks."

"You can, though! Greatly help them. You can be tidy, for instance. You need not spend a great deal of time or money on dress; but every girl can put on bodices and skirts that match, and sew the braid on her skirt, and hook her blouses properly, and brush her hair well, and arrange it neatly."

Mary fingered her coffee-spoon, somewhat dashed.

"I suppose I could, now," said she with unwilling acquiescence. "I've always been too busy."

"Oh, dear, dear! You women who work," said Mrs. Ellestree. "Why will you lose your femininity?"

"You don't lose it from choice," said Mary. She was looking out through the night-filled window with a rather queer expression. It was easy to lay down laws for the protection of woman's charm, in this restful long-dayed life, but her mind dwelt on the

conditions of the life where girlhood toiled, and studied so that it might toil to more advantage.

"If you are nothing but a hack," said she, "you haven't the spirit to deck yourself out. The things you think of are rent and doctor's bills and saving for a sick fund. There isn't room for vanity; life is too desperate. If you're wondering how you're going to get your next meal, you don't care whether you will look pretty eating it. If you knew the feeling of being absolutely alone, with no one to care whether you live or die, or are hungry, or clothed *at all*, you wouldn't sneer at working women."

"I don't sneer, dear!"

Mrs. Ellestree put her hand on Mary's with a tender impulse. "I pity them with all my heart."

Mary withdrew her hand rather curtly.

"Well, we pity you, too," she said unexpectedly. "Pity you awfully. We do keep ourselves. We haven't to obey any one. And if we have to spend a lot of time in getting our speed up on a typewriter, there's no more drudgery in that than in knitting; and we get paid for it."

Mrs. Ellestree was smiling openly, she crossed to the sofa with her knitting bag, pausing to lay her hand on Mary's shoulder.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," said she, "we're all dependent on one another, whether we are in an office or a home. If you modern women could only see how foolish your independence is, you would understand why we old-fashioned women hate its ugliness."

Mary was silent. Mrs. Ellestree took up her knitting, serene and fair, bending her head over the moving needles.

A sudden bitterness came over Mary. She pushed back her chair roughly, and rose, her hands tucked in her belt, her chin tilted defiantly.

"I'd like to know where I'd have been without my

independence," she said abruptly. "I was brought into the world without any provision for my keep. Uncle Tom didn't want me. He had to pay out money for me which he could ill afford; had to curtail his pleasure and his wants. He let me know that. I had to earn my living. I had no time to study how to be a charming woman. I had to study how to get my bread. Well, I've done it. But I should like to have seen Uncle Tom's face if I'd told him my first duty was to be charming, and his duty to provide the money for my keep and adornment so that I could be it."

"Yours is an exceptional case."

"Not a bit. The other girls in my office had men-folk of some kind: but their brothers didn't offer to divide their salaries with them: their fathers didn't offer them allowances. If they wanted things, they had to go out and earn the money for them; and I believe brothers, and fathers, and uncles have always been the same. Look at their sports, and clubs, and bars, and music-halls. Their womenkind put up with it: they didn't expect men to give them anything unless the men were in love with them, and wanted the women to be pleased with them. But the old maids, and the sisters, and the daughters didn't get too much consideration or generosity. Where would have been my self-respect and dignity if I hadn't worked? Now, I feel I've a right in the world."

"My dear, I think you've been splendid. But I'm only sorry that you haven't had a happier life."

"It has been happy!"

"Very well then. I am sorry you have lost so much."

Mary's cheeks flamed at the quiet words.

"One can't have everything. What have I lost?"

Mrs. Ellestree was not used to such a stubborn show: she spoke slowly, dropping in each word with extra weight.

"All that makes woman dear to man—gentleness, grace, obedience, dependence."

"I have other qualities."

"Men do not value them without the others. Wait till you meet a man who attracts you! You will give all your independence then to see him look at you as a man looks at a woman who gives him what he wants from womanhood."

Mary remained still, her hands in her belt, one knee upon the chair. Uncomfortable belief was growing. She recalled the anguish of the moment when a certain young man's eyes had looked down into hers and she had seen pity in them. She would never see him again, of course, and he mattered nothing to her: yet the memory was a bitter one. She felt with terrible conviction that she had lost the grace of womanhood.

Then a new light came into her eyes. The defiance in her bearing intensified. Mary was nothing if not militant!

"I have gained a lot of good in the struggle; and if men don't want courage, honesty and honour in women they ought to. Any rate, prettiness and gentleness aren't as important in the life I have to lead, and that is the thing I must attend to."

"Come here," said Mrs. Ellestree.

Mary knelt down by the sofa. Mrs. Ellestree pushed back her hair, and looked into the angry eyes.

"I have grown very fond of you," said she. "I don't discount your splendid qualities one bit; but I want you to be happy and there is only one way in which a woman can be happy. That is through love of man and motherhood. It is what we are created for, and as we can only gain our joy by pleasing man, we must make ourselves what he wishes. Beauty attracts him most: so however difficult our life is, we must never let that go. Charm attracts him, pretty manners, a sweet voice, soothing words; so we must

keep ourselves charming. Oh, my dear, it is hard on the working woman, but it is worth any sacrifice to gain the love of man."

"Is that all he wants from us?" Mary's eyes were searching. The older woman drew her breath in sharply.

"He wants very much from us. Our trust, and worship, and obedience, and if we do not feel these things, we must pretend we do. Nothing angers a man so much as feeling we do not trust his own valuation of himself. We must never let him know that we see through his pretensions and view him simply as a human creature, equal to ourselves. It is worth it. He is the only thing, you see, we want; but he wants many other things, so it is hard to win and keep him. We cannot afford to lose any weapon."

"He does not spend his time making himself beautiful or charming to win us."

"He does not want us as we want him. His desires are divided: we have only one."

Mary drew back suddenly.

"I want other things than man," said she. "I have other duties to perform than pleasing him. And I would never give myself to a man who only desired to be pleased and soothed by me. He must want me to be brave, and strong, and good, as I should want him to be: he must love me for all that is best in me; and if a man were great enough to deserve worship, he wouldn't care whether I worshipped him or not. It's only vanity and weakness that make men insist on being worshipped. We ought not to encourage it in them. We are being unfair to them by pretending to trust and worship them for the sake of pleasing them."

The elder woman put her arm round the girl and drew her to her.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" said she. "How little you know of life. I wouldn't alter your ideals for

anything: but don't expect too much from man. No man has that to give which you are asking for. He is born to use us as he ordains. We must be strong to endure his neglect, but we must not grow strong enough to do without him if he will not meet us on equal ground. He hates us then, and leaves us to loneliness, despised of all our fellows."

"Then he is ignoble," said Mary.

"He is all there is, my dear," said Mrs. Ellestree, "we've got to make the best of him!"

"But do we?" said Mary: she sat back on the hearth-rug. "Don't you think you consider his opinions too much? We respect him because of his independence. Don't you think he might respect us equally if we were independent? Men consider gentleness and self-sacrifice the attributes of womanhood, but it seems to me that women think selfishness and cruelty necessary to manhood! Well, I *don't*! I think better of men. I expect them to be braver, more honourable, more self-controlled, more capable, and more unselfish than myself, and I will never give myself to a man who isn't!"

Mary's eyes were flashing: her face was uplifted like a young knight throwing down the glove before the world. Mrs. Ellestree looked affectionately on the slight young figure: a smile lit her face.

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait a long time," said she. "But keep your faith as long as you can. I wouldn't destroy it for the world."

There was a note of experience in the older woman's voice which chilled the girl. She sat down on the fender stool, her hands stretched out on it on either side of her.

"It's funny," said she. "I never wanted or expected anything like that before I came here. Now . . . you've made me want so much. I believe I do want to have charm: only I value the other things most. Tell me what is wrong with me."

"Your frocks, your hats, your hair," said Mrs. Ellestree promptly. "I am longing to make a pretty woman out of you."

"Could you?" Mary spoke with rueful humour.

"You wait and see!" I shall take you to Camille's to-morrow and order some little muslin frocks. I've some beautiful Valenciennes which she shall put on collars for you. And for hats. Well, you shall have my white one with a new bow—we'll get it to-morrow. You mustn't wear flowers or feathers: you must go in for exquisite simplicity. I must get you some shoes too, and silk stockings. You shall buy those yourself."

"I shall buy them all myself."

"No, no, no. The frocks and hats must be my little present. I've just had a big cheque from Tom. Let me do this for you, dear. It will be such pleasure to me. I shall feel as if you're my own daughter."

"Oh, you're so good to me!"

Mary dropped on her knees again, in a passion of gratitude. Mrs. Ellestree held her hand trustingly.

"I love having some one to take care of. It's like the old Ferroll days. You've never seen Ferroll, have you?"

"Your brother?"

"Yes. Poor Ferroll!"

"Why do you say 'poor?' "

"He is always seeing stars, and reaching up his hands to them; and finding they are only bits of tin."

"What is he?"

"A wanderer! He has a devil of adventure which never lets him stay long anywhere. He's very clever though, and always falls on his feet: and when times are bad, he comes here."

The tenderness in Mrs. Ellestree's voice showed there was always a welcome waiting.

"Is he like you?"

"We're like and unlike. Ferroll has always been

taken care of, and I've always taken care! Naturally, such conditions have developed us differently. He hasn't had to restrain himself. Life gives him what he asks for."

"What is that?"

"Experience, excitement, adventure, love."

"Is he married?"

"Married? Good heavens, no! He's only twenty-six. He'll never marry. No woman will keep him: and all will love him. He would be a spoilt child, only his nature is so sweet that nothing can spoil it."

"You love him very much!" Mary was gazing up into the woman's face, almost in awe.

"Love him!"

An expression of pride, devotion and affection illumined Susan Ellestree's face.

"He is everything to me. He has always been everything."

"It must be good to be loved like that!"

Mrs. Ellestree touched the girl's hair with a quick gesture.

"I love you too. Ferroll has left me now; you are filling his place as no one else has done, not even Tom."

"I'm so glad," said Mary. "You've been so kind. I shall always remember and be grateful. You've changed the world for me."

Mrs. Ellestree kissed the upturned face.

"I'm rather a lonely woman," said she, "I'm glad you love me dear."

The girl did not answer. She had known little love, and was filled with gratitude and worship. In her soul she registered a prayer that some day Fate would let her show her gratitude.

CHAPTER VII

"When I was a greenhorn, and young,
And wanted to be and to do,
I puzzled my brains about choosing my line,
Till I found out the way that things go."

CHARLES KINGSLEY, *The Fool's Song*.

FERROLL'S return was characteristic. Mrs. Ellestree arrived home tired out after a long afternoon's shopping, and was greeted by the scent of her own special cigarettes. On entering she saw the tea-table pulled up to the sofa, and on the sofa reclined a boyish figure immersed in her last acquisition from the sunny shores of France. Ferroll, *débonnaire*, serene and comfortable, had returned to the shelter of his sister's roof.

One of the most shamefully unfair things in life is the way in which prodigals are welcomed. It almost forces one to be inconsiderate in sheer self-defence. Ferroll accepted all things and made no attempt to repay even in the small coin of urbanity. He was as exacting in his ideals as he was careless of his responsibilities. He indulged in the luxury of absolute sincerity and did not attempt concealment of his prejudices. He was the most difficult of all people, if only because he was so utterly spontaneous; and his egotism was even stronger than his sister's.

And yet his coming was the greatest joy vouchsafed to Susan Ellestree, and she went forward with a cry that told of all the longing in her heart.

"Ferroll! Oh Ferroll!"

He put his hands upon her shoulders, and stood looking at her, humorous affection dancing in his eyes.

"Well, Sue! You look very fit."

"Do I? Oh, my dear, how glad I am to have you back. What *have* you been doing!"

"Oh, I dunno."

Ferroll drew her down on to the sofa, slipping his arm in hers in a brotherly fashion.

"So Tom's going to America, I'm sorry for that. I like Tom."

"He's a dear old thing. I'm quite missing him."

"Yes. Your occupation's gone, now, isn't it. What are you doing with your married void?"

"As cranky as ever!"

Mrs. Ellestree turned to her cigarette-box with a laugh that had a tinge of annoyance in it. Ferroll and she differed upon some subjects, he was full of theories, and all did not fit in with Mrs. Ellestree's ideals of woman's place and purpose. His tone now implied criticism of her leisure.

She had always combatted his strenuous suggestions with the defence of wifely duties and submission. But Tom was not here now.

She made haste to explain her further tie.

"I'm very busy, all the same! I'm turning a typewriter into a woman! It's a wonderful thing to mould a soul, Ferroll; and that's really what I am doing."

"*You* mould a soul, Sue!"

Mrs. Ellestree had risen and stood by the tea-table, pouring fresh water from the silver kettle. A perplexed light shone in her brother's eyes. His forehead wrinkled as he watched her, imperviously self-pleased.

"Don't you think my influence would be a good one?"

Mrs. Ellestree queried with a smile that was wholly tolerant. She was so utterly serene in her goddess-like attitude that Ferroll felt a spasm of half-humorous irritation. He leant back suddenly, squashing his arm into the cushion.

"Good God, Susan! You make me want to throw things sometimes. You're so dashed certain of yourself. Whom are you educating?"

"Tom's niece. A little clerk, who's been starving in Birmingham all her life on thirty shillings a week. She overworked of course as women always do, and had brain-fever and I've had to take care of her. She's just been left two hundred a year, so that she's independent."

"And you're moulding her."

"I'm teaching her the possibilities of womanhood," said Mrs. Ellestree with a quiet dignity which would have impressed most people: only Ferroll writhed.

"Your idea of woman's possibilities?"

"Yes. My idea," Mrs. Ellestree answered. Her lips closed together rather obstinately. "The natural possibilities she was born with, not the intellectual ones theorists are providing for her now-a-days."

"Oh my dear Sue, will any one ever be able to convince you that fine qualities are as natural for women as for men."

"Have I ever disputed that?"

"Your whole scheme of life disputes it!"

"I didn't know I had ever failed you, Ferroll."

"Dear old girl, you never have. Nor Tom either. But it's yourself!"

Ferroll leant forward, his hands clasped between his knees. His intensity made him seem older.

"Oh, Sue, Sue, Sue! When I look at you and think of all your possibilities, and what you might have made out of your life and yourself if it hadn't been for this cursed ideal of femininity you've been brought up to! 'A woman's first duty is to look as beautiful as possible! To be attractive, to arrange her manners and opinions as to what pleases man.' Not man like me, who loves companionship and individuality, but man who has to be lied to, and cozened, and made to feel that he is looked up to

and is master. You're a living example of intellectual woman spoilt by cowardice."

"My dear boy, all people don't want to be intellectual. I prefer to be a woman."

"Yes, because you're afraid men won't like you if you use your abilities. You daren't fill up your empty life with the work and interests you might have, because you're afraid you'll spoil your charm. Own it."

"I'm not afraid; I am simply not attracted by all this platform shrieking and club life. I prefer to attend to my private duties and keep Tom's home a home."

"Good heavens! A home for Tom! A comfortable place for Tom! His life's spent in his clubs and round the tape-machine. What does he want from home?"

"He expects me to keep one for him: he married me for that. It's no good, Ferroll. I'm the old-fashioned woman, who believes that woman was made for the comforting of man."

"Not his helpmate."

"We help most by being ourselves. Just restful."

"Oh, great Scott!"

Ferroll turned impatiently.

"'Woman's duty is to be woman.' That means she's to stagnate. She's not to join the march of progress, not to free herself from uncongenial conditions so that she may develop her finest self! not to fulfil the duties of her citizenship. No! She's to sit by the roadside, and keep her hands manicured and her face soft, so that when man turns from the fight he finds her waiting for his refreshment. That's the plain sense of it, the plain, brutal, logical conclusion behind your talk. It isn't pretty, is it? My country! When I see a woman like you with her face-woman and hair-doctor, and masseuse . . . and her dressmaker and milliner . . . it's such a degradation of your intellect and soul, for those to be your greatest interests!

You were brought up on the domestic drudge ideal: you've glorified it into that of the courtesan."

"Ferroll!"

Mrs. Ellestree's voice rang forth indignantly. There was a commanding note in it which stopped the impetuous words.

"It's a pity you came back if you've grown to think of me like that."

"No, dear. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that, not exactly. It's only because I think so much of you."

Ferroll had flung himself upon the rug before her. He knelt, holding her, his boyish face turned up towards hers, love and pity fighting with the strenuousness of his purpose.

"You're so wasted, Sue. You've such a mind and such a will, if you would only use them."

"I am using them in my own way. You can't make everybody fit in to your pattern. I've my work to do in the world, and it seems as important to me as yours does to you. There must be some people who are passive forces. I try and exert an influence on the people who come near me. Really that influence isn't as trivial as you think. Why I am changing a whole life; warming a soul into existence!"

"The clerk-girl?"

"Yes. She's only lived for work till now."

"I wonder what you're teaching her!"

"To make the best of herself. You should see how changed her face is. When she came, it was full of lines, though she is only twenty-four."

"And you've taken her to your face-doctor."

"I've doctored her heart, Ferroll."

Susan's hair rested on his hair; her eyes looked down on him with motherly tenderness. With a rush of remorse, he laid his head down in her lap, as in the old days when he had been naughty and ungrateful, and Susan had forgiven him.

"Dear old girl, I don't forget what you have been to me. It's only of yourself I think. Your life is lonely. You can't be happy, with only Tom to think about. Tom who's away now for God knows how long, and when he comes back—well, you know that you don't count as you ought to count to him. And you're so big and strong! There's so much to you. Oh, Sue, you've so much love locked up within you, I get afraid sometimes. It's dangerous to have as much vitality as you and I have, and nothing to work it off on."

"D'you think all these years haven't taught me self-control? You forget my wisdom. I accept what is given to me and make my own contentment. Besides, I'm not lonely now even though Tom's away. I have grown very, very fond of Mary. Her worship reminds me of you, in the old days when you weren't grown up and clever, and didn't criticise."

"Sue! Sue!"

Mrs. Ellestree put her face against the soft, fair head, bowed upon the boy's arms."

"Do you love me?"

"Of course!"

"Oh, Ferroll, that's all I live for. To be loved! It hurts me when you grow away from me. You used to think me perfect, didn't you?"

"You've always been a perfect sister, anyway."

Ferroll raised his head and got up; he leant against the mantelpiece looking at her with a puzzled look.

"Yes I'm right," he said with a frown. "I know I'm right. Why won't you use your brain and think."

"My dear, I am a woman; and you must let us judge what is right for ourselves," said Mrs. Ellestree with a smile. "Come! don't let's waste time discussing about things on which we shall never think alike. You haven't told me a thing that you've been

doing, or what your plans are or even where you're staying."

"I'm at the 'Cecil.'"

"Good gracious! Things are looking up, then!"

"Rather. I've come over to find authors for a new American magazine. I met the editor in Paris. He took a fancy to me and when he found out what a lot of people I knew over here, he gave me the job. He's paying all my ex.'s and ten pounds a week. Not bad, is it? These Americans! They're the only nation who'll pay for qualities. Here am I, an eternal spring of enthusiasm and belief, and no one's ever made a bid for all that force until this man came along. And it's worth buying, Sue. That's the glorious part of it!"

"My dear, I'm so glad. It's splendid. How pleased Rosalys will be. We were talking about you only yesterday."

"Is she in town then?"

"Yes. She's going down to Cookham next week. She's taken a house there for the summer."

"How is she? Any fatter?"

Mrs. Ellestree smiled, preening her graceful figure with an involuntary movement.

"Poor Rosalys! She's worrying as much as ever about that. I don't think she altered much. There's her last photograph."

"She's older. Those big women always age." Ferroll put down the picture indifferently.

"Ferroll, I could shake you sometimes. You're so inhuman. When one thinks of how much you used to rave about her."

"My dear Susan, that was three years ago. I'm growing older every minute."

"Still you needn't drop your friends."

"I don't drop them: but I don't keep them tied on to me. If I did, I couldn't grow."

"I don't like you to be so changeable."

"I can't help it. Growth means change. Can't help it? I wouldn't help it. I want to change. If the same things attracted me now that appealed to me three years ago, I should feel I had been stagnating. Of course I've outgrown Rosalys. She satisfied a temporary need."

"You're abominable."

Ferroll threw back his head with a peal of laughter.

"You do hug sentiment," said he good-humouredly. "You know as well as I do that Rosalys has loved a dozen men since she and I enjoyed a temporary madness. Yet you'd have me talk of her as I talked then; when I was a love-lorn young idiot who thought her the incarnate, natural woman. Oh, I've nothing against Rosalys. I'd like to see her, but I know what she is and what she's worth."

"You make me shiver sometimes."

"Why? Because I'm truthful? Yes. I must come like a cold douche in this atmosphere of half-lights and emotions. Never mind. It's tonical . . . Is that the bell? Hang! Do say you're out."

"It's Mary,"

"Must she come in?"

"Of course. She'll be intensely interested."

"Dare say she will. Point is, I sha'n't be."

"You are too selfish. Well dear, did you find your way?"

Mrs. Ellestree had turned towards the door, with a pleasant smile of welcome for the newcomer.

"This is Ferroll. Ferroll, this is Mary, I suppose you must say Miss van Heyten."

Ferroll did not express any unwillingness at the restriction. His gaze rested on the insignificant figure with an indifference that felt the *gêne* of her presence. He had so much to tell Sue. This stiff young woman spoiled the atmosphere. She had no allurements. His cold gaze saw evidence of Susan's

taste in the French blouse and big straw hat, but the improvement did not interest him. He knew many women. Mary was unformed and awkward, a typical "provincial."

For all Ferroll's theories, he demanded "personality" from woman—definite feminine personality. Mary's stiff manner and unresponsive eyes chilled him. He was very like his sister in his temperament, though he would have indignantly denied the accusation.

So he sat silent, and refused to expand to Susan's questions. When Mary rose to depart, he opened the door with an alacrity which sent the blood flushing to the girl's cheek. She went out of the room with her chin lifted very high, and a smarting sensation in her heart. She was not wanted. Every now and then she had that miserable sensation here. Mrs. Ellestree was always kind, but her intimates showed that Mary's presence was an intrusion. She did not belong to the easy, friendly atmosphere.

She was right in her conjecture. Ferroll closed the door upon her, and leaned against it with a breath of relief.

"That's a comfort!"

"I'm not pleased with you."

"Oh, but my dear Sue, the girl is a bit impossible."

"She's one of your business women."

"I didn't say I wanted women to work typewriters, any more than I want them to work sewing-machines. She's the apotheosis of everything that's set and rigid. Oh, you're dressing her up at this moment and it amuses you and her; but you'll never change her, never. She'll never belong to us."

"Am I included with your highness now?"

"Don't be an idiot, you know what I mean. Hang it all, we're both cosmopolitans. We've both got our full share of temperament and sensation. If that girl knew you, she'd call you immoral."

"She worships me."

Ferroll stood with his hands in his pockets, looking down on his sister with rather a queer expression.

"If she knew you!" he repeated. "At present, she only knows what you choose to tell her. And as everything here is utterly different from everything she has ever seen, she's too *bouleversée* to appreciate values. But when she gets used to you, she'll begin to notice things; and she won't understand any better, but she'll think she will."

"And will judge me as you do?" said Susan with a sore laugh.

"No. She won't understand," said Ferroll again. "I'm your brother."

Mrs. Ellestree was looking down. And odd, choky feeling had come over her. Ferroll did not bring comfort. He read her thoughts and spoke quickly.

"Why, Sue, you're the best thing I have," he said. "You see, I *know* you."

CHAPTER VIII

"Youth is the time to go flashing about, from one end of the world to the other."—R. L. S.

MRS. ELLESTREE had gone out to dinner, and Mary was alone. She had been reading for some time, but her thoughts were too insistent to be held, even by Stevenson. So *Men and Books* lay deserted on the sofa, and Mary moved restlessly about the room, looking for the hundredth time at the Japanese prints whose qualities Mrs. Ellestree was trying to teach her to appreciate. Finally she brought up before the photographs upon the mantelpiece; Tom, Rosalys and Ferroll. She studied her uncle's face, marking the square jowl and solid sullenness, and wondering again how Mrs. Ellestree had ever married him, or marrying him, was happy! Then she took up the huge panel portrait on which sprawled Rosalys' abundant charms, and felt again the instinct of repulsion she always experienced in Rosalys' presence. Miss Benton was very kind, she told herself, summoning up remembrance of Rosalys' many invitations; but yet—she put back the photograph with a little shiver. Miss Benton was so big and overpowering.

Lastly, her gaze fell on the platinotype engraving from which Ferroll's intense profile glimmered forth. It was a fine picture of strenuous youth, noble, exalted, passionate. Ferroll at his very best, his face upturned his eyes fixed directly in front of him with the light

of purpose in them. The lips were curled rather contemptuously, the head thrown back as if in irritation at life's slow progress. It was the face of a dreamer, an enthusiast. The evanescent weakness which sometimes showed in the real Ferroll, was not there.

Mary turned suddenly away. She was angry with herself for being so irresistibly interested and attracted in this supercilious young man who never thought her worth talking to. Ferroll was always dropping in, but he ignored Mary. He wanted Susan's sympathy alone.

Once Rosalys had been there, and he included her in his magnetic interest; he had laughed and talked with her; he, she and Susan forming a delightful trio, intimate and irresponsible. Mary felt the cold, unreasonable pricking at her heart again. She walked to the window, trying to put these people from her thoughts. The window was wide open, and the moonlight streamed in a broad band on sill and carpet. Now and then a footstep paused on the deserted flags and could be heard till it died away in the distant tumult of the Strand.

It was a night which set young blood stirring restlessly, a night that clamoured for adventure. Vitality was coming back to Mary. A nature as vigorous as hers could not remain idle long; her natural channel of mental activity stopped, reviving strength sought for another outlet. In the atmosphere of emotionalism into which she had been transplanted, romance hovered round her fancy tantalisingly.

The vanities of women were still new, but to live with Susan Ellestree was an unconscious education in coquetry. Admiring Mrs. Ellestree as she did, she fell to copying her ways; and no longer thought time wasted that was spent in manicuring her fingers or brushing her hair till it glossed and shone. The fresh and simple frocks chosen by Mrs. Ellestree

appealed to Mary's taste. Outwardly, at any rate, Mary showed vast improvement.

Inwardly? Well, as Mrs. Ellestree said, the "woman" in her was growing every day, and the austere conscience that had stayed with its owner through the long years of toil was learning, albeit uneasily, to walk hand-in-hand with that convenient companion, tolerance.

Yet the romance of life was not for her. Instead, there loomed across her vision Berryfield's and its responsibilities. Her thoughts travelled back there not wholly sadly. Though one side of her was attracted by the ease of this new life, she knew in her heart it could never satisfy her. She was possessed of too much energy. Ambition fired her. Oh, it was good to feel strong again; to feel capable of undertaking all that she was bound to do.

She stretched herself, holding out her arms in the joy of it.

Business! That was the thing to steady this unquiet leaping of her soul! That was the cure for morbid loneliness and smarting vanity. When she got back to the office how trivial these little pricks and slights would seem . . . into what far-away perspective Ferroll and all the people at the flat would fade. In the meantime . . .

"Oh! I thought Sue was here!" Ferroll stood just within the door.

Mary came back to consciousness of the immediate present, and found it tumultuously real.

Ferroll was here, alone with her—Ferroll astonishingly graceful in his evening clothes.

"Is she out?"

"Yes. She's dining at the Carlton."

"She never told me."

"Some American friends came to-day and insisted on her going."

"What a bother."

Ferroll looked round the room ill-temperedly. He stood hesitating.

"I've rotted my whole evening. I meant to have a talk with Sue." He looked at his watch. "It's too late to do anything. It is a nuisance."

Mary was moving to the door. He let her pass absently, still engrossed in his disappointment; then suddenly remembering his social obligations, turned to hold open the door. As he did so, his eyes fell on Mary.

She was dressed in a white frock of Mrs. Ellestree's devising; it gave her a proud, young look. Her chin was tip-tilted dangerously; her eyes were shining. There was a resentful aloofness in her bearing which Ferroll discovered was provocative.

He held the door-handle. She stood waiting for him to let her pass. His eyes searched hers, quizzically, with awakening interest.

"Where are you going?"

"To leave you."

"Why?"

"Because I have no desire to stay."

"But why not? I am going."

Mary hesitated. A light leapt into Ferroll's eyes; the faintest of smiles curved his lips. He threw the coat he carried on to the chair.

"That is, I'm going in a minute; when you've told me why you so dislike me."

"I?"

Mary's astonishment was so genuine that a pleased smile crept over Ferroll's face. It was succeeded by a somewhat more chastened look on her explanation.

"Why, I've never felt anything to you at all; or you to me."

The eyes were so honest that Ferroll's conscience stabbed him. The least one could give this girl was sincerity.

He answered truthfully.

"I know. Forgive me. I was saying the usual thing, to see what you'd say. It was pretty feeble. But now I do care what you think. I want to know what you think. I want to talk. May I stay?"

Ferroll had capitulated. Frankly and simply he laid down his arms of indifference and superiority, and stood before her, serious and even humble. He moved back a step or two from the open door so that she might have free passage if she willed. Then waited.

Mary's heart gave a sudden leap; then seemed to stop still in the tide of excitement that rushed over her. She could say nothing. The practised Ferroll read assent in her confusion and liked her because she made no endeavor to conceal it. He moved towards the fire-place, talking in a commonplace and natural manner.

"That's right. It's awfully kind of you. I'm just in the mood for a real talk. Do you ever feel like that? As if you simply must go out and find some one who understands things."

"I haven't had much time for talking." Mary was returning somewhat nervously: she hesitated by the sofa.

"Do sit down and be cosy! Let's make the fire up. I love a fire and an open window, don't you? Sue always keeps her rooms so stuffy. I loathe scent."

Ferroll was kneeling on the hearth-rug, skilfully negotiating the embers into flame. The light leapt up, and cast a flickering glow upon his face. Mary had subsided on to the sofa. She sat with her hands on either side of her, still on the defensive.

Ferroll threw back his head with an irrepressible laugh.

"It's good to see you sitting down. I wasn't quite certain that you really would stay. I dunno why. Yes, I do. I believe you're very independent. Aren't you?"

"I've never thought about it."

Mary's answer checked any intrusion into the domain of personalities. Ferroll was quick to feel the sensitive retreat. He redoubled his attentions to the harrassed fire.

"You come from Birmingham, don't you?"

"Yes."

"It's a fine city, isn't it! Strenuous. Stimulating!"

"It's all right."

Ferroll broke a coal with unabated patience.

"Yes. So grimly, nakedly matter-of-fact. They don't bother with the artistic or æsthetic side of life. No mysteries or illusions. Art's a concealment and selection at the best of times. Here in this flat, one almost forgets what real life is."

"Do *you* feel that?"

Mary was sitting up staring at him, thrilled and fascinated. This was a new aspect of the *blasé* world-worn young man who had shown his scorn for her so openly.

"Yes," he looked up at her amusedly. "Didn't you know Sue and I are always disagreeing? We have the most heated arguments. I can't stand this eternal bath of sentiment and indolence. I like real things; progress, purpose, industry! This is a hot-house. I want the world outside—the plains, the sea, and stars."

"And work!" said Mary.

He had plunged into the heart of things, and was carrying her along with him forgetful of all else.

"Yes, work! This passivity is sluggishness. The world is moving; no one has any right to sit in scented rooms doing nothing but look pretty. Don't you see? It's all wrong!"

"Of course it's wrong. I don't agree with Mrs. Ellestree. I think as you do."

Youth had met youth; in the Sahara of humanity

two individualities had found each other. The event was electric, amazing. They wanted to say everything at once. They understood.

"Do you?"

Ferroll was staring at her; how had it come that he had been so stupid, he, who was ordinarily so sensitive to personalities? This girl had character, stability. He read infinite resolution in her square jaw, infinite sincerity in the grey eyes that looked into his with no coquetry.

"I *say*, how is it that I've never seen you? I mean, seen the real you. I only saw a mouse-like ghost that was in the way; when all the time you were there, some one more real and vital than anybody."

"It wasn't to be surprised at. I'm nobody of importance—here."

"Nonsense."

"I'm, from the provinces."

"The provinces are of supreme importance. They've produced me, and you, and Susan!"

"Not Mrs. Ellestree! Women like her don't grow in the provinces."

"Why not?"

"Oh I don't know. She comes from a world of restaurants and dressmakers and beauty and . . . and idleness."

"A fairly lonely world."

"Why do you say that? She's the happiest person I know."

Ferroll pursed up his lips enigmatically.

"Is she?"

"She has all she wants. A lovely home, friends who worship her, beauty round her; and a husband."

"Tom? He's a good sort, but frightfully selfish. Most men are. He works hard, sleeps all day, and has all his interests centred round the Press Club and the tape-machine. He's fond of Susan in a way, as long as she doesn't interfere with his comfort or his

freedom, but he's not much of a companion to grow old with."

Poor Susan! She had guarded her married life so loyally, and Ferroll threw open the closed door ruthlessly, pointing his moral for all the world to hear and see. Mary had imagined the unknown uncle Tom to be a model of devotion; it was part of Susan's code to make the best of things. A neglected wife was not a dignified spectacle; Mrs. Ellestree upheld the chimera of Tom's silent worship in a way that her friends called "beautiful" and that amused Ferroll. His smile had a pitiful tenderness. Poor Sue. She grasped after the show of love, pretending to all that it was hers though in her heart she knew. Poor Sue, with her great womanly vanity.

"I thought Uncle Tom adored her."

Mary's eyes were wide. Ferroll shook his head.

"No. He's accustomed to her; but she fidgets him. He wants his freedom and Sue wants to take care of him. Oh Lord, Lord, won't women understand all men don't want dry nurses? Will they never understand we want to live, and work, and fight by ourselves? Ye gods! When I hear the sermons that Sue preaches it makes me want to go out and shout them down. They want to put us in prison; to capture us and keep us tied to their arms, and so they turn their thoughts to waking up our passions so that we may be their slaves. Why can't women see that there are bigger aims than that? Oh it makes me mad! I want to call things out from the house-tops and make people listen!"

Ferroll broke off incoherently. He had risen and stood with his profile turned to Mary, forgetful of her presence. His eyes looked out of the window into the vast distant skies.

Youth is at the forefront of the march. It must wave the banner in the sunlight with a banging of drums and a flashing of swords and all the noise and fury

possible. No half-measures, base acceptance! If only the world would listen and follow, instead of sitting still in its snug apathy. Until youth's vitality begins to ebb and its views become more moderate—its certainty less certain; and lo, and behold, youth sits with the grey beards on the wall, and waggles its head at the shouting, blustering young fools who have come after it.

Ferroll was still in his heyday of enthusiasm, his were the most progressive ideals of his age; he loved the companionship of woman; she was so sensitively appreciative, so stimulating, so idealistic. He longed to raise her.

She was appreciative now! Mary sat with her hands tight-clasped, thrilled with passionate response! So did she think! Yet for Ferroll to agree. Ferroll who had seen so much and knew so much. She no longer felt provincial or immature. Ferroll championed her.

"But why do you think for us? You're a man."

"Why?"

Ferroll brought his gaze back from the stars to the concrete again. His look rested on the girl in a half-dazed fashion; then he turned and began to pace up and down the room.

"Oh, I don't know. I think about all sorts of things. It seems to me man is tied up with woman, and he can never rise while she's sitting still, contented. Both must spread their wings! Yet fools still live who speak of man as a separate animal. A god with woman as his creation. It doesn't work, you see."

The boy's face was old with thought.

"How is it that you and Mrs. Ellestree think so differently?"

"I can't believe she does think differently. But she's lazy and she does love being loved. That's Sue's tragedy—her vanity. Oh, when I think of her—that mind, that energy, that body—maimed and cramped for the sake of a fool's ideal!"

"Why did she marry Uncle Tom?"

"To get away from home. It was the only way she knew. My father didn't believe in women working. He liked to keep them at home to obey, and glorify, and wait on him. And my mother, poor little thing, was always dinning into Susan's ears the one door that a woman might go through. I was only fifteen then, and fully occupied with my own misery. No one thought of Sue working or making a career. She was beautiful, she was brought up to marry. Life was such a hell, she took the first man that came. I should think it's a common story."

"For pretty women. I had to work."

He had reached the window; he turned now, half-sitting, half-leaning on the window-seat.

"Why did you strike out?"

"I had to earn my living."

Ferroll stuck his heels against the skirting-board, he leaned forward, his hands in his pockets, fixing Mary with his intent gaze.

"What do you do?"

"I was a clerk; then private secretary."

"Where?"

"A tube works, we've two thousand workpeople."

"You look so young."

"I'm twenty-four."

"Two years younger than me!" Ferroll's brow was puckered up in a mystified fashion. "I know lots of women but I've never met one quite like you. You're so . . . so . . . infernally contented with yourself. I should think you're a success in business."

"Why?"

"You've got such an air of confidence. Most women who work apologise to us all the time and explain that they aren't really independent of us. You haven't once said you're the old-fashioned woman!"

"I'm not."

"No; but it's dashed honest of you not to pretend

to be; you haven't told me you're 'very feminine,' either; nor talked like a blithering, childish fool: I've never met a clever woman yet who hasn't. Hang it all. You don't seem to care a continental what I think of you."

"I haven't thought about it. What's the good? If you like me, you like me; if you don't you don't. I can't change myself to please you. Why should I?"

"I dunno." Ferroll stared at her in a perplexed way.

"It wouldn't be honest."

"No; but women aren't honest with men."

Mary frowned.

"Men aren't honest either; they pretend to each other that women are fools, and they know perfectly well they're not."

"I say! Where did you pick up this knowledge?"

"There are fifteen men clerks in our office. I've a better head than any one of them; and every one of them obeys me. Yet when they go home in the train they talk as if they were the rulers of the earth and I an accident. They may be gods outside, but they shrink to very human limits in the office."

"I say! You are hard on us."

"No harder than you are on us."

"Come, I believe in women. I think there have been some very clever ones. Of course they are exceptions."

"And I think there have been some very clever men . . . but I haven't noticed they're the rule!"

Mary's eyes met Ferroll's shining with excitement. There was something altogether new and stimulating to be discussing such things with this wonderful brother of Mrs. Ellestree's. As for Ferroll, his mouth twitched into an unwilling smile, then it spread to his eyes and he laughed outright.

"Scored! Of course I think all women *ought* to be on an equality with us, but we feel we're sort of help-

ing you up, you know. I—I really have never met any one quite like you. I don't know whether I like you or not."

"Indeed!"

Mary's eyes were dancing, the blood was racing feverishly. Why, this was sheer adventure!

"Oh *don't!*" said Ferroll. He got down from his perch and rammed his hands into his pockets desperately. He looked absurdly young as he stood there. "Don't be feminine. After all, I'm a man, and when you put your chin like that, and sniff at my impertinence, it makes me feel hunterish. Know what I mean; the brute instinct stirs, and I want to tease you, and, oh, hang it, don't let's flirt. We've something much better to give to one another."

"You never stay anywhere?" said Mary somewhat inconsequently. A sudden depression had come over her. Mrs. Ellestree's words were sounding in her ear. *No woman will keep him.*

"No!" Ferroll's eyes were far away. "Directly I plant a stake in friendship, country, occupation, I feel it pulling!" He began to pace the room. "That's the trouble! Directly you offer your hand to any one they want to padlock it in gyves of personal possession. I must develop by myself. You can't grow up tied to any one or anything. Yet directly you feel sympathy with any human person, especially if it's a woman, she resents your freedom. She wants to guide you or to follow you, only she must be attached in some way. She must know all about you, meet your friends, discuss your conduct, approve or disapprove. Why can't people leave me to work out my own destiny without talking about it? I don't want anybody's praise or censure. I only want to be left alone. It's *I* who am doing, and only I know why; and even I don't sometimes. Then how can they? If people wouldn't *hinder* with their silly chattering tongues!"

"I don't want to talk about you. I'm not even curious," said Mary. She lay back white and tired. Ferroll turned impatiently.

"Of course! I know. Don't be so personal. I shouldn't talk like that if you wanted to cling on. Must there always be these eternal explanations? Take me for granted as I take you."

"I do," said Mary. Ferroll's roughness hurt her. He heard the quiver in her voice.

"You're tired?" He brought up sharply in front of her.

Mary nodded.

"A little! I've been ill. I'm not quite right yet. Talking tires me."

"What an egotistic brute I am. Oh, I say, I'm sorry. Look here, it's all right. I know you understand. D'you see? That's why I like you so much. You're everything I want woman to be. Sue would think that was a proposal. But you know what I mean. I like you because you made no claim on me, and yet you understand!"

"I'm going." Mary had risen; she drew herself up proudly. She resented Ferroll's words.

"Really? Then I shall wait for Sue. You're not angry. Oh, you mustn't be. I want to see lots of you. We're going to be friends. I'm worth while having as a friend. Ask Sue. She's one of my real chums. But I want to be honest with you from the first moment, I want to warn you against myself. Hasn't Sue told you what a rolling stone I am? I can't help it. Everything calls to me and I have to follow. But I respect you, somehow. You're so plucky. I believe you're the first woman I've ever met whom I've not tried to interest.

Mary drew herself up and looked him in his eyes.

Ferroll's self-assurance made her furious. He was cautioning her against taking undue notice of his fascinating self!

"You do interest me," she said with lofty frankness. "but, as a matter of fact, there was no need to warn me. You don't know, of course, what important things I have to think about. Good-night."

"What!" said Ferroll, and turned after her with the devil in his eyes; then, as she departed, drew back with a laugh, albeit it was at his own expense.

"Important things!" said he with a whimsical pucker. "Oh, hang it all. She's too good to play with."

He was sincere when he said he did not want to flirt with Mary. He recognised the courage of her soul and respected it. He would have liked to respect all women, but sometimes they called to him from the roadside, and sometimes—alas, for Ferroll's ideals!—it was his mood to answer.

There was a savage side to his nature which loved the feel of power; loved to see red blood blushing tell-tale underneath his glance; to feel that he held happiness in his touch, and might grant or withhold.

But Mary's eyes had looked back fearlessly; she disdained to use the common tricks of woman's armoury; strong, clean and pure, her spirit fired with sympathy for all that was best in him.

When Mrs. Ellestree returned, she found her brother sitting soberly in the big chair, so lost in thought he did not even hear her entrance.

"Ferroll!"

The soft white arms descended round him; a flushed cheek pressed itself to his.

"My dearest boy, what a delicious surprise!"

Ferroll responded to the embrace gracefully. He was very fond of Sue, and emotions did not embarrass him as they did most people.

"How long have you been here?"

"All the evening."

"Then you've seen Mary?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"Gone to bed. She was tired."

"With you here?"

"Yes. I'm afraid that I exhausted her!" Ferroll's eyes caught hers shamefacedly. Then he burst into a laugh, and perched himself upon the arm of his sister's chair. The serious mood was gone. His eyes shone Puck-like in the moonlight, challenging his sister's questioning glance.

"I haven't flirted, honour! But I talked, I own it! How is it I've never seen her before. I must have been mad."

Mrs. Ellestree's eyes darkened. She looked up sharply.

"You must be careful. You're the first man she's ever met."

"She's none the worse for that."

"But she can't take things lightly . . . even you."

"What rot." Ferroll drove one hand into his pocket and got up shortly. "This eternal emotionalism makes me sick. Why, in heaven's name, an intelligent man and woman can't spend an hour or two together discussing things in which both are interested without being suspected of wanting to squeeze each other's hands!"

"If it were only that, I shouldn't mind!"

"Pon my soul, Sue!"

"Now don't be silly. I shouldn't care if you only flirted; but you're so absorbing and exacting in your egotism. You stamp your personality on women. You drain them dry of sympathy—and then—go on."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, Ferroll! Rosalys."

"Rosalys is a great animal. You know she is. I own I thought she had a soul . . . at one time."

Mrs. Ellestree put down her gloves with decision.

"You used to say that no one understood you so completely. No, Ferroll. I don't often deny you

anything, but I can't let you spoil Mary's happiness. I don't want to see her disillusioned. I want her to meet some good, clean-minded man whom she can trust and who will be worthy of her trust. She mustn't be experimented on."

"Don't talk as stupidly as if I were a professional Don Juan."

"I shouldn't have any fear for Mary if you were. But you attack from the spiritual side of emotions. You make women believe in you. My dear, I love you, but I'm your sister. I know your artistic temperament through and through. I know the strength of your intentions; the other women only hear you talk. They haven't watched you talk—and ride away—as I have!"

"I'll promise not to flirt. I've told her so."

"You've told . . . her . . . so . . . Oh, *Ferroll*, you are naughty!"

Mrs. Ellestree looked at him in a despair that had yet a note of laughter in it. Ferroll had the grace to look confused.

"Really! She's the sort of girl one can be friends with."

"But, you're not the sort of man an inexperienced girl can be friends with." Mrs. Ellestree looked at him with a frown into which affection could not help but creep. "No, Ferroll dear, I shall not encourage your sudden sympathy with Mary. If you've any love for me at all, you'll keep off personal talks with her. I wonder if it would be any use asking you to promise."

"Not such a ridiculous thing as that," said Ferroll loftily. "Mary and I understand each other."

Mrs. Ellestree bent towards her brother almost in appeal.

"Ferroll," said she, "I'm not silly, but I love this girl. I feel a mother's responsibilities toward her. You know I have always helped you in your friend-

ships before! But I can't sacrifice Mary. She's alone and unprotected, and I stand between her and the world. Come, I don't often ask you to do things for my sake; but leave Mary alone."

"All right! . . . I won't experiment. There! I promise!" Ferroll rumped his sister's hair. She laid her head back against his shoulder.

"Oh, Ferroll, I'm glad I have you back again."

CHAPTER IX

"Must you gather?

Smell, kiss, wear it—at last, throw away!"

R. BROWNING.

THE river lay still and hot in the July sunshine. Now and then a passing launch sent a lazy wave gurgling among the willow roots, or a punt pushed slowly past, but for the most part silence reigned—lazy, luxurious silence, when the lawn, and willows, and low house with its flower-baskets and vine-clad verandah seemed fast asleep.

The little group of basket-chairs upon the lawn was tenantless; a scarlet sunshade sprawled upon the grass, a cushion had slid down from the nest upon the largest chair. Some illustrated papers lay upon the wicker table, but their readers had vanished.

Cuvier stepped out on to the verandah, a crimson rambler rose in a tangled wall before him, forming a flowery screen through whose interstices the lawn showed like a stage-picture. He drew a deep breath of contentment.

He had come down for a week-end to Rosalys Benton's bungalow; Rosalys and her party were evidently on the river, for the little launch that popped its nose habitually out of the trim boat-house had gone. He left the verandah, and walking across the lawn stood for a moment or two on the edge of the water. On the other side of the river stretched meadows, blurred by a thin haze from the intense heat. Somewhere a cricket chirped.

The most successful firms have their moments of depression. The last few months Cuvier had been hit hard. A certain Government contract which Cuvier had counted on had fallen to Berryfield's, the latter firm offering terms that could only be termed suicidal. Since the death of its head, far from becoming more quiescent, Berryfield's seemed to have developed a positively venomous activity with the object of the total extinction of Cuvier's, at the cost of bringing Berryfield's to grief with it, for the orders Berryfield's were capturing could not only bring them no possible profit, but must be executed at enormous loss.

Cuvier's face had not a pretty look as his thoughts flew back to the inexplicable policy of the rival firm. Berryfield's must suffer with him; but other firms were making headway through this vicious competition.

There could be only one reason for such malevolence: Berryfield's had got wind of the patent and were deliberately trying to make it impossible for him to close when the option expired. His hard mouth curled scornfully. Had he not put his finger on Berryfield's tactics they might have succeeded, but, as it was, he had foreseen their purpose and had taken steps to guard himself.

If the process passed all the tests, there would be no danger of his not being able to pay the ten thousand that would make the patent his. That acquired, he would be indifferent to anything that Berryfield's could do. If the tests did not fulfil the golden promise, however, and there was a very reasonable possibility that the final progress might prove impractical, well . . . Cuvier shrugged his shoulders. If the worst came to the worst, he would only go under temporarily. He had been bankrupt before. But in spite of his philosophy the strain was telling on his nerves: there was another month to be endured

before the tests would be completed. Each day a new surprise was sprung on him, obviously emanating from his enemy; his cool head and balanced judgment began to fail him; and on the realisation of this he had decided to remove himself entirely from the worries for a day or two. Nothing could be done in London this week-end, and he had carelessly availed himself of Rosalys' easy invitation.

He did not object to Rosalys, he had not any particular liking for her, but she could be trusted to have a good *chef*, a luxurious and artistic home, and an easy atmosphere of emotionalism. Added to these attractions, her cottage was but a short run from town, and, while he was away from his distraction, he could be summoned at a moments notice. Therefore, he had wired that he was coming, and resented in no whit her absence on his arrival. Peace! That was all he wanted.

"Is that Mr. Cuvier?"

A voice clove the stillness.

Cuvier turned in some surprise, a surprise which was increased when he saw that he was being addressed.

A woman had stepped out from the verandah. She looked simple and dignified, traits which did not over-inconvenience the run of Mr. Cuvier's feminine acquaintances. Yet for all her matronly demeanour, the woman was smiling at him in a pleasant welcoming fashion.

"You're Mr. Cuvier, aren't you? Your wire came after Miss Benton had gone on the river. She was expecting a wire from the theatre, and had told me to open it and answer. They've gone up in the launch to Pangbourne and won't be back till dinner-time. I'm so sorry."

"It's all right. I can look after myself quite well."

"I was going to offer to entertain you!"

Susan Ellestree spoke with humour. Cuvier responded to her friendliness.

"Then I shall have nothing to complain of!"

"That's very nice of you!" Mrs. Ellestree blushed becomingly. Happiness shone in her face. She showed her pleasure at the compliment without dissimulation.

"You don't know who I am, do you?"

"Mrs. Ellestree, isn't it? Miss Benton has spoken of you."

"Rosalys is so ridiculous about me! I tell her it's most unfair to me. People must be so dreadfully disappointed!"

"The reply is too obvious."

"Do you really think so?"

Cuvier marvelled at her pleasure. One handed her a withered branch, and her pleasure at the gift made it bud with blossom, becoming precious to both recipient and giver. She appeared to regard this harmless repartee as sincere tribute, receiving it as her right, and never doubting it was genuine ore, and not base metal from the mint of idleness. Was she colossally vain, or exquisitely simple-minded?

Cuvier expected women to be his least exacting relaxation, and desired nothing from them but the crudest and most elemental satisfaction. He had heard a great deal of Mrs. Ellestree: Rosalys liked to advertise her as the best type of "a really *good* woman." As a matter of fact, Miss Benton's raptures had not aroused his interest. Virtue had no attractions for him.

But now that he stood face to face with Susan Ellestree he began to perceive that woman might have charm without being corrupt. Susan's fresh smile involuntarily compelled response. She belonged to the garden and the summer and the sweetly-fragrant stillness.

"May I stay out here?"

"Yes. Wouldn't you like a drink?"

"That's very thoughtful."

"I'll ring."

Mrs. Ellestree disappeared into the house. Cuvier retraced his steps to the group of chairs and stretched himself upon the largest one. He discovered that he was mildly interested in the growth of their acquaintance. He was not certain that he wanted to make love to her, but he felt her presence soothingly.

Presently a servant came out bearing a tray on which gleamed ice and cooling liquids. Still Mrs. Ellestree did not appear: the shadows had visibly lengthened since his coming: he began to feel impatient.

Meanwhile Susan Ellestree was lingering over the last touches of her toilette; deliberately protracting it, if only because she was longing so feverishly to join the stalwart figure stretched in the acacia's shadow—longing with an intensity which almost frightened her. Yet when nothing more could be done to beautify herself, she sat down at the writing-table and wrote letters while the little clock ticked round with maddening slowness: not, indeed, till a good hour had elapsed since Cuvier's advent did she sally downstairs. Her wisdom in the minor things of life made her think she was a discreet woman.

When she at last returned, Cuvier rose to greet her with unfeigned pleasure.

She came across the grass lightly, with joyous steps, that in spite of all her efforts would not fall soberly, her white gown floated out upon the close-cropped sward; her throat lifted a little, appealingly. She took the chair he offered and settled herself into it, accepting cushions with graceful composure.

Cuvier abandoned himself again to a half-lying posture, his eyes lowered upon the grass. The stillness seemed to fold gentle wings over the landscape. From a bed of heliotrope close by, warm fragrance

weighted down the air. Mrs. Ellestree had taken out her knitting. The click of the needles sounded peacefully.

"Why were you so long? I thought you were never coming."

"Was I long? I had some letters to write, and you looked very comfortable. Weren't you?"

"Oh, I don't know."

Cuvier leant his head back, closing his eyes. Mrs. Ellestree saw that his face had a strained look. She spoke with motherly compassion.

"I'm so glad you've been able to get off for a few days. You look as if you needed rest."

"Unfortunately one can never rest completely. The whirr of the wheel is always sounding."

"Shut your ears."

"To the voice of the syren?"

Cuvier's eyes opened. Mrs. Ellestree laughed a little.

"I call work the syren, a horrible hooting steam-whistle of a syren. She really mustn't come into our garden!"

Cuvier smiled again, rather cursorily.

"I'm afraid her voice dins in our ears, like the sea in a shell. You can't banish her." He took a deep breath. The frown had settled on his forehead.

"Well, you mustn't think of her when you're with me. I forbid it."

"Give me an alternative, then."

The women he knew would have availed themselves of the obvious opportunity. Susan Ellestree replied quite simply.

"Can't you merge yourself in this atmosphere? It always rests me to get away from a great city."

"London?"

"Any city."

"There is only one in England."

"What about the provinces?"

"Dogholes!"

"And London the man-trap?" Mrs. Ellestree's voice came with sweet gravity. "I come from the provinces myself. I was born in Manchester and I appreciate them. You Londoners don't take the provinces nearly seriously enough. I own their limitations are evident, but they needn't be lifted so completely off the sphere of your consideration. They're so much more settled than London. We're all unstable here. London's too full of temptation."

"Not for you, Mrs. Ellestree?"

Cuvier struck in with apparent carelessness. Something fired in Susan's eyes.

"Specially for me. I've a very strong lower nature that's always warring with the higher part. There is a higher part, you know." Her look met his with a compound of hardihood and resolution. This great financier with the tired eyes and inscrutable lips woke up the depths and she knew it. She resented his look and triumphed in it. Determined not to be entangled in the sleeping fires, yet thrilled with the intoxication of the danger. There was danger, his look promised it.

That no overmastering temptation had seized on Susan in the past she counted as a virtue. Yet in truth the average man is not such a ravening hunter as fame paints him. He is too lazy, or too jaded to advance unless he is encouraged. Susan laid down her limitations and her men friends kept within them patiently enough, because they had no great wish to transgress. Mrs. Ellestree was an autocratic woman, and her philosophic intelligence counted against her personal attractions. If one side of her nature pulled her down, the other side repelled invaders by its dignity. Only a particularly strong man, confident in his omnipotence, would feel temptation to break through. Cuvier's eyes showed his complete disregard of Mrs. Ellestree's defences.

Was it bravery that made her fling her shield deliberately before him?

We have said that Susan Ellestree had never been pursued by a conqueror. She knew her will was stronger than that of all her "make-believe" admirers. Did the lower nature which she avowed so frankly long now to be mastered?

Cuvier was speaking in his deliberate fashion.

"Surely our intellects were given us for the purpose of discriminating and developing emotions, not for stunting them. How then can one's intellect war with one's instincts?"

"One has a moral sense."

"Has one?" Cuvier lifted his eyebrows languidly. "I'm afraid I haven't."

The sleepy eyes looked at her smiling.

"I thought a moral sense was as antiquated as a conscience. I prefer a sound philosophy of life?"

"What is your philosophy?"

"Epicurean."

"Pleasure?"

"Conflict."

"Does your philosophy help you in defeat?"

"I have never had occasion to experiment."

"Do you withdraw then when you find the conflict difficult?"

Mrs. Ellestree's glance was stimulating.

Cuvier suppressed a smile at the first fall of the flag. She had shown so plainly that she wanted him to follow.

"I never withdraw, Mrs. Ellestree, when the quarry is started."

Mrs. Ellestree bent down over her work somewhat suddenly.

Cuvier watched her curiously. He had liked the pleasant frankness of Susan's welcome and the equally pleasant intimacy into which he had stepped

at once without undue fatigue, but he still was at a loss as to Mrs. Ellestree's moral limitations. One moment he believed in them; another, a look, a smile, would set doubt stirring. And yet, even when doubt stirred he was conscious of a certain respect for her which he very rarely felt for women. He paid her the compliment now of being interested.

"What is your safeguard?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"It's rather difficult to explain. What stops the dry-rot in woman which lack of occupation always brings to man?"

"Women have different functions from those of men."

"I don't quite follow you."

"Well, marriage plays a far more important place in a woman's life than in a man's."

"Because of the children?"

"Yes."

"But thousands of women don't have children."

"Then they can devote more time to their husbands. A husband is a lifetime's occupation, you know."

Cuvier looked at her somewhat curiously.

"D'you think so? I should say that most men would very much resent their wife hanging round all day. She'd be in the way."

"I leave my husband severely alone!"

"You're sensible, but while it's all right for him, what keeps you morally, mentally, *humanely* sound?"

"Do I strike you as not being that?"

"I don't know. That's what I'm wondering about. I can't quite make you out. I suppose you give people a certain amount of passive pleasure by your society, but I can't see how any one with brain and energy—and you seem to have both—can be

satisfied with such a . . . flower-like existence. Heaven knows, I love women to have charm, but I always wonder if they feel it's worth a life—a whole, long human life—devoted to what, after all, is only superficiality."

Cuvier's eyes studied her with a rough impersonality which his hearer found supremely irritating. Her smile was forced. There are certain kinds of criticism, which do not place one in a becoming light. Cuvier's tone implied a doubt as to the successfulness of Mrs. Ellestree's carefully-thought-out personality.

"Don't you think there's room in the world for some women whose only ambition is to make their homes real homes, and their husbands and friends as happy as possible?"

"And themselves." Cuvier put in the addenda as the logical conclusion.

"It's our duty to be as happy as possible, isn't it?"

"And it makes you happy? That's what I want to get at."

"Don't you think I look a happy woman?"

"I never pretend to read a woman's face," said Cuvier. "To me, women's eyes are always asking. But you haven't answered me. You are held up as an example of the typical 'good woman.' Does goodness satisfy you?"

"My dear Mr. Cuvier, is anybody ever satisfied?"

"Not with results, perhaps, but with one's purpose, most decidedly. My business gives an outlet for my vigour which nothing else could give, but then it engrosses me. There's always something to be fought with, whether one succeeds or fails; always a definite progress being made one way or the other, back or forward. It's motion. It's life. But what has a 'good woman's' day to give her? Making a home for

a husband who comes to it in the evenings and not always then. There's not much keen exhilaration there. Making her friends happy by being pleasant and sympathetic. But her friends want very little from her when all's said and done, unless they are leeches, when I'm quite sure a woman of your sense would suppress them. What do you really live for? Forgive me, if I seem inquisitive. I don't know many good women. The opportunity for investigation as to a respectable married woman's point of view is too rare to be lost."

"I am afraid your experience will not help you to understand us," Mrs. Ellestree said quietly. There was disapproval in her demeanour. Cuvier stretched himself more comfortably in his chair.

"I have no time to investigate the microscopic subtleties that differentiate your charming sex," he said coolly. "Women supply a certain need: I avail myself of them at intervals as I avail myself of other luxuries. They are one more of the creature comforts a beneficent Almighty has provided! Being a hardworked man I can't afford the time to break down the restrictions with which so-called good women hedge themselves. Many men prefer a run for their money, but women as a sport seems child's play to me. There are much keener sensations to be had."

The words struck brutally, all the more because of his knowledge that he attracted the woman beside him.

She heard the words with a strange sinking of the heart, but she answered with her customary wisdom.

"Women have much more to give than a man like you can ever know. That is your loss, however. To good women, as you call us, your opinion or judgment is not worth very much. We know our barriers are unassailable; but as you will never test them, there's

no reason why you should not think them easy of conquest if it gives you pleasure to think that."

Her tone was fully as cool and as detached as his. A gleam shot into Cuvier's eyes. He looked at her again. She was knitting calmly, her face bent composedly over the stitches. She seemed neither piqued nor angry: safe in an impenetrable citadel of self-control.

"Are you challenging me, Mrs. Ellestree?"

"I was not thinking of you," said Mrs. Ellestree. "I was speaking of your type: I believe it is a fairly common one."

"Not in the least a common one," said Cuvier. His cruel mouth was smiling: his half-shut eyes rested on the woman in an amused fashion. "Work is my chief and only happiness. In this world of an eight hours' day you must confess that gives me distinction."

He was amusing himself with her. Mrs. Ellestree again felt a blank and desolate sensation. She smiled rather uncertainly.

"And also it is surely a distinction to be invulnerable to woman's power!"

Cuvier appreciated courage. Mrs. Ellestree's eyes roused him. He responded to the challenge daringly.

"I'm very vulnerable to the excitement of the chase."

"I thought you had no time to break down the restrictions of 'good women.'"

Cuvier looked back, undisturbed. "No, I haven't. If a woman's eyes don't invite me I don't follow. But when they do invite me . . . to conquer . . ." Mrs. Ellestree's cheeks flamed suddenly. The best of her nature rose in her arms against the open insolence . . . "invited" him . . . "invited" him . . . Indignation thrilled her. She lifted her head, looking at him.

"You are insulting!"

"I? To whom?" Cuvier responded with cruel innocence.

Mrs. Ellestree still lifted her head proudly.

"Me. All women, when you talk like that."

Her scorn rang nobly. She defended not herself, but her whole sex. Something in her bearing stilled the sneer upon his lips. There was a silence.

Then he spoke. "I beg your pardon. Would you like me to go?"

The question came so quietly that she did not at first realise its significance. Then it dawned upon her with the perception of her triumph. She had compelled his respect!

Alas! the joy of the victory was greater than other considerations. The woman in her leapt up, exultant! She had not only won his interest; she had impressed him. He had begged her pardon.

Go? Spoil the victory? No! Let her keep the captive.

Alas for her short reign. She showed her elation . . . showed, too, her desire to keep him. . . .

"Why should you go, now that you understand?"

He leant back without answering. The secret smile curved his lips. He read everything that she was thinking. She wrapped the pose of "goodness" round her as an insignia of authority. It gave her added power: respect: admiration. But beneath the imposing trappings there was the same greed of homage, the same eternal seeking to attract, the same joy in the arousing of desire. His cold eyes laughed. Mrs. Ellestree felt the subtle change in atmosphere. She was not a stupid woman. She carried the attack into his country.

"This is Rosalys' house, not mine; and you are Rosalys' friend. So it would not be right for me to ask you to leave here, simply because you do not

believe any woman has the moral sense. That is what you think, isn't it?"

Cuvier paused a moment. Her composure pleased him. He spoke frankly.

"Honestly, then, yes. No woman has it, because every woman's morality is clouded by her sense of sex."

"Those are terrible words . . ." Susan Ellestree's face blanched slightly.

"True ones. Woman cannot be impersonal. It is a physical impossibility! Her purpose is personal: to fulfil the need of man."

"But is his need only so one-sided? He needs her sympathy, her spiritual influence, her counsel. He needs her moral help!"

Cuvier shook his head with the touch of amused knowledge showing in the action.

"If he is a man . . . no. You are a sensible woman, and a plucky one. You wouldn't give two straws for a man who didn't make his own laws, code of morals, life-work, ambitions, interests, alone, without a woman's help."

Mrs. Ellestree's work had fallen from her hands. She sat looking at Cuvier in unconscious fascination. He was so big, so strong, and so regardless of her. She struggled still, though, in a passionate desire to win that touch of respect he had shown at first.

"But if you met a woman who viewed things impersonally . . . whose moral sense was strong, true and clear . . .?"

"I should respect her," the faintest of twinkles lurked in Cuvier's eyes, though he spoke with gravity, "but I shouldn't make love to her."

"Don't you think she would be worthy of your love?"

"She wouldn't awake it. You see, such a woman couldn't be relegated to the casual things of life—and

there's no room for a woman in the things that count to me. I don't want anybody there."

"In business?"

The words came jealously.

"Yes. Women can't grasp big issues. They daren't act on instinct without being hysterical. Defeat paralyses them. Women are out of place on battle-fields."

Her own ideas; yet Mrs. Ellestree was conscious of a curious sinking feeling.

"Yes."

"Why do you say 'yes' so sadly? You aren't one of the emancipated?"

"Oh, no, no." Mrs. Ellestree made haste to deny the accusation. "I'm the old-fashioned woman. I agree with you in everything, except that I think women help men more, perhaps, than men know. We help by being just ourselves . . . we rest them. And we have the moral sense; at least, some of us have. I have it most decidedly."

Cuvier flicked his cigarette.

"That is what puzzles me," said he, with unexpected naïveté.

"Why are you such friends with Miss Benton?"

"I love Rosalys."

"Do you consider she has . . . the moral sense?"

"I call Rosalys a good woman."

"Then you and Rosalys are alike?"

"Oh, no. I . . . I have much more self-restraint than she." . . .

Cuvier smiled at the quickness of the denial.

"But you both have the moral sense?"

Cuvier's voice came with lazy impertinence. Mrs. Ellestree heard the mockery. She answered with a certain dignity.

"Rosalys would be very loyal to the man she loved."

"No matter how many," Cuvier put in a pleasant parenthesis.

"She is very emotional! But she can't help that. One must make allowances for temperaments."

"Yours is colder?" Cuvier's eyes questioned pointedly.

Mrs. Ellestree bent her head over her work in somewhat of a constrained manner.

"I don't say that."

The smile leaped up again. Cuvier enjoyed the fencing-bout.

"You wouldn't love on compulsion?"

A pause. Cuvier deliberately flung his cigarette into the river.

Mrs. Ellestree had bent her head so low down that he could not see her face. The faint smile was tinged with triumph, his half-shut eyes surveyed her carelessly.

"Afraid . . . to answer?"

"How ridiculous you are. I wonder where Rosalys can have taken them." Mrs. Ellestree put down her work with a trembling smile that could not be coerced into unconsciousness.

"I haven't the faintest curiosity. I am consumed with a much more overpowering one. If you were captured, Mrs. Ellestree"—the words fell distinctly one by one, Cuvier's glance gave no mercy—"you'd respect 'natural man' and would be his slave like 'natural woman.' Come. That's your philosophy. Own you'd like it put in practice."

Insolently irresistible, Cuvier leant back in his chair. The words might mean everything, nothing. His serene demeanour gave no indication.

"I shall do nothing of the sort. You forget I am a married woman, Mr. Cuvier."

There was coquetry, challenge, stirred excitement in the answer. Cuvier lifted his head up, his bright

eyes lingering on Mrs. Ellestree like an amused caress.

"What are you smiling at?" Mrs. Ellestree bent her head industriously while she asked the question.

"Nothing," murmured Cuvier.

His eyes rested on her with the freedom of a caress. Her heart beat with unaccustomed quickness, an extraordinary sensation of joy and triumph circled her. For the rest of her life, she looked back on that afternoon when she felt the first touch of the ideal passion for which her heart had thirsted all the weary years; when romance stretched out a strong hand and she knew she might close her eyes to everything, knowing it was coming.

Poor Susan; so pitifully laying down her all—for what?

For a moment's pleasure to the man who lay back, wordless, content to watch the blood flushing to her brow under his scrutiny. Verily when the worker almost breaks beneath the struggle it is good to step into a garden off the highway, and rest among the flowers, feeling them pulse obediently, thrillingly, beneath the careless touch.

The sound of a puffing launch wheezed suddenly behind the boat-house. Soon it emerged from behind the willows, with Rosalys, bountifully radiant in pink muslin, waving her parasol excitedly at sight of her guests upon the lawn.

Men filled the basket-chairs within the launch. A subaltern in flannels, fat and sleepy; a cynical novelist lying with his feet up; a dark-eyed young actor, handsome as a mediæval knight, Rosalys' latest acquisition. Furthest from every one, tucked away in the bows, a slight and silent figure sat. She looked so out of place in her simplicity that Cuvier's eyes rested on her in amused surprise.

The launch was approaching alongside. The young

actor had risen, Rosalys had linked her arm in his to steady herself; the launch lurched and he put his arm about her and held her tightly.

Cuvier looked towards the bows; a stern, small face was gazing rigidly before her, disapproval in every line of it.

"There I should imagine is a young woman with the moral sense," said Cuvier; his eyes were glinting cynically. Mrs. Ellestree smiled, but with a touch of reproof.

"Yes," said she. "It's not a comfortable possession. She's in a strange world, poor child; and can't fit into it. She will learn tolerance. All young girls are unco guid. Mary is so sincere and strong. She won't have any compromise with her ideals. It's stupid, but I admire her for it."

Cuvier and she moved forward to the party. Rosalys welcomed him with her usual exuberance; she was flushed and excited. Mary was following behind.

"You don't look as if you'd had a very happy day." Mrs. Ellestree put her arm in Mary's protectingly.

"No."

"Why not, dear? I was envying you this lovely sun."

"I can't stand people making love to one another before everybody."

"Hush-hush!" Mrs. Ellestree stopped the girl in quick reproof. "You must not show your prejudices so strongly! I want to introduce you."

Cuvier turned.

"Let me introduce my niece . . . Mr. Cuvier . . . Why . . . Mary!"

The girl had stopped dead, her mouth half-open, her eyes staring; then, as a sudden rush of angry crimson rushed over brow and cheek, and with a look in which scorn, hatred and disgust were nicely mingled,

she had turned her back and marched up to the house.

Cuvier was not a vain man, but Miss Van Heyten's disapproval seemed almost unnecessarily unaffected.

He sought Mrs. Ellestree's eyes in mild amazement.

CHAPTER X

"The man who cannot forgive . . . is a green hand in life."
R. L. S.

It was the peaceful hour that comes between tea and dinner; the sun was nearing the willow-trees and the rover had turned to molten silver. The house-party was gathered together on the lawn, all sitting round the tea-table, too lazy to move.

Cuvier still made his headquarters there, motoring backwards and forwards to the City. He lay now, tired and dusty after the daily spin, resting in the contemplation of Susan Ellestree's reposeful fairness. There was a perfect contentment about her in these days that was pleasant to look upon.

Cuvier still hovered on the borderland: he knew he had only to stretch out his hand to take this woman; knew that the moment was coming when passion must be avowed; and yet he lingered lazily. This quiet waiting-time was so comfortable he was loth to exchange it for the more exacting pleasures of an open intrigue.

Besides, while he found Susan Ellestree a refreshing change from the stereotyped gamins of the *coulisses*, she did not inspire him with any overwhelming passion. She was too certainly the property of man.

Rosalys, the sensuous and emotional, would be harder to keep prisoner: such women swayed after every Jack o' Lantern: coquetting for the joy of

coquetry, affording continuous entertainment. Mrs. Ellestree's loyalty once gained would be his for ever. Cuvier had no ambition for permanent relations with any woman. Yet his eyes did not leave Mrs. Ellestree. When one is tired and worried, certainty is soothing.

Rosalys and the actor-boy were conducting an unabashed flirtation, while the other men acted as interested audience. An atmosphere of intimacy was in the air. They had all been together for a week, and were advancing to the stage when freedom oversteps the bounds usually allotted it by conventional society.

The spell of inaction had lasted long enough. Rosalys lifted herself up from her chair.

"Who's for the launch? We shall have time for a run before dinner. Will you come, Sue?"

"I should like to: I've been sitting still all day. Come, Mr. Cuvier. It will do you good to get a breeze after the City."

The group broke up following Rosalys and Mrs. Ellestree: only one was left, a youthful figure whose downbent eyes, in all the preceding interchanges of chaff and laughter, had not stirred from the pages before them.

"Is Mary coming?"

"Oh, I think not. She's quite happy with her book."

Mrs. Ellestree did not encourage the suggestion. Between her and Mary a shadow had arisen, none the less substantial in that neither of the women had voiced the feeling. For though Mrs. Ellestree could still say to herself that she was doing nothing she need be ashamed of, yet she had begun to feel a relief when Mary was not with them. The Puritanical stock from which Mrs. Ellestree had sprung had its own way of asserting itself.

The launch departed with its noisy freight, and the garden and the river sank back gratefully into

Nature's stillness. The sunlight travelled slowly through the willow leaves, fading imperceptibly; a quiet greyness began to steal out of the shadows. Mary lifted her eyes to where the clouds were rising in rose-pink masses, gloriously upwards to the flaming skies.

Oh, the relief to feel they were all gone! borne away on the smoothly-flowing highway, leaving the sunset and the peace unmarred by foolish laughter—and worse than foolish whispers.

Her face was hard in its young severity: her eyes stern and lips set. The sensuous atmosphere with its lack of restraint and its incitation to one object only, the gratification of the senses, grated on her purity. Mary had been brought up in a grim school; she had had no experience to teach her toleration.

She could appreciate none of the qualities of the people round her: her stern sense of decorum blinded her to the fact that much of the foolish talk and careless handling was due to sheer excess of animal spirits. The manners of Bohemia are not those of business people; and yet there may be virtue in Bohemia.

But young people see no half-lights; just as Mary had idealised the London of her first experience, so did she wholly condemn her present environment.

Only her love for Mrs. Ellestree caused her to remain in such unsympathetic company. Her ideal of Susan was shaking, but it had not fallen. It was as if she saw a radiant being turning her back on all possibilities and hastening eagerly towards the dross of life, to bury herself under it. She dare not leave her to her fate; and yet she could only watch in anguish. Comment from her would be impertinent: she realised miserably enough that Mrs. Ellestree would crush her protests with unanswerable sneers—a “provincial” was not fitted to judge her, still less a youthful, unversed business girl who had never known

man's love. Though diamond-pure, youthful instinct counted for nothing.

The wind that had ruffled the surface of the river through the long, hot afternoon had died away: only a trace of crimson remained in the heavens: still as silver, the river stretched in a broad sheet in which a little moon hung palely. Mary's hands were folded in her lap: silent as the night which was descending, she stared before her.

A centre of anguish, fear and rigorous condemnation, strangely alien to the calm acceptance of God's jurisdiction shown by Nature round her.

The one touch to make the landscape perfect, in the eyes of a romantic young gentleman who was coming down the lawn.

It was Ferroll, arrived from London without warning! He knew that Rosalys would always find a corner for him, and Mary was a potent magnet. He had seen a great deal of her before she and Mrs. Ellestree left town, and his interest had deepened with every talk they had. She was so self-reliant and yet so simple. Ferroll found himself missing her in a way that astonished him; wherefore, being a true artistic vagabond, he had followed inclination promptly.

"Hullo! Are the others all out?"

"Yes."

"What a piece of luck!"

Ferroll threw himself down on the grass without further ado: then looked up at Mary with the smile of an old friend. She drew herself up stiffly. The friendship had grown healthily and innocently, but now his presence was disconcerting: though Ferroll had not offended, he belonged to the other camp: she knew instinctively he did not feel to them as she did.

Ferroll's quick gaze soon read her discomposure.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Nonsense. You aren't happy?"

"Not very."

"Why not?"

Ferroll's compelling will wrested confession from her.

"I don't like staying here. They . . . shock me."

"What do you mean by 'shock you'?"

"I can't explain."

"Yes, you can. Out with it."

"I couldn't to you."

"My dear girl, we're friends. Think of the talks we've had."

"We were: but we can't be now. You belong to them: you did before you met me."

"That's rot. Every human being has the right to make and keep what friends he chooses, wherever and whenever he may meet them. I can listen to what's worrying you without enlisting on either side. It will be a good thing for you to have your trouble considered impersonally. Emotion obscures vision. Come along now! Tell me everything!"

Mary hesitated: then pushed her hair off her forehead with a desperate gesture.

"I don't like it. That is all. I have a feeling something is happening which I don't understand."

"I'd leave instincts alone if I were you. Don't think at all: it's not worth while."

Ferroll's tone was kindly, but Mary detected a lack of sympathy. Her eyes flashed.

"Perhaps *you* say it's silly to be . . . good."

"I love you to be good."

Ferroll wriggled himself towards a chair, and propped his shoulders against the cushioned seat.

"Good in your own way," he repeated. "The old-fashioned sort of good. You're such a help, Mary; your straight, stern little ideas are splendidly purifying. You believe in them so, don't you?"

"Do you think people can be 'good' in different ways?" said Mary, with fine scorn. "Women who let men make love to them, for instance?" The colour mantled at the words.

"Live and let live," said Ferroll philosophically. "Humanity's a big thing to dispose of. One wants a lot of experience to judge with any attempt at fairness; and even then——"

"One doesn't need experience!" Mary burst out in a flood of anger that could not be controlled. "However inexperienced one may be, one knows it isn't right for women to let men pay them compliments all day and think of nothing but dressing up and going into pretty attitudes. I hate to see people kissing one another. It makes me sick. I'd like to set them all down, men and women, to book-keeping, or put them at a typewriter; anything to keep their minds on something besides this sickening love they talk of all the time. We don't have business men like Mr. Cuvier in Birmingham. The men go off by themselves and keep together; they don't hang round after women, and married women, too, reading aloud to them and patting their hands in punts. It makes me ashamed to be a woman. I want to get up and go right off and leave them. I do, most of the time. I know I'm called priggish; I feel I ought to try to be broad-minded; but I *can't be*—I *can't be*!"

"Who's Cuvier?"

"Cuvier's tube works. He's very wicked and staying here, and always with Mrs. Ellestree."

"O-ho! Sue's flirting, is she?"

Mary's face was a miserable answer.

"But you mustn't take Sue's affairs seriously. She doesn't mean anything."

"She does. I feel she does. But I can't say anything to her; she'd only call me silly and provincial, as you do. Only—if you love some one very much, and find

she isn't what you thought her, it makes you feel as if . . . you can't bear it!"

Ferroll remained silent: his face leant back, looking across the darkening sheet of water, past the willows (now a nest of shadows), past the sweep of meadows, further than eye could see. His features were set in serious lines. The careless adventurer, tasting life's madness with rapturous zest, had vanished: in his stead a man, who was young still but who knew all things, spoke soberly.

"You know, you're rather hard," said he.

Mary experienced the sensation of an unexpected douche. A moment since she had rested in absolute infallibility; no question of the justice of her action assailed her. Now, Ferroll's words struck her sensibility unpleasantly. The door of doubt in her judgment had opened, albeit the fissure was almost imperceptible.

"I can understand that you feel out of it," Ferroll continued. "I understand your not liking Rosalys, in one way: only you *must* make allowances for different temperaments. I'm not defending her. I know she's very lax. But she has some splendid qualities, and you misjudge Susan when you think it's only material pleasures that attract her to Rosalys."

Mary's heart was beating hurriedly. Her position, in some unexplainable way, was no longer an heroic one. Something stabbed within her conscience.

Ferroll continued inexorably.

"She's very fond of Sue," said he. "And Sue loves being loved. She's made like that; it's unfortunate for her, but she can't help it. It's a pity she hasn't a too happy home life but she hasn't, and women like Rosalys warm her. There's an atmosphere of big-hearted affection round them. Rosalys is wonderfully kind. She loves giving."

"You have to pay for it," said Mary. Her look met his hostilely. "You have to give up disapproving

of her. You must watch her kissing men, and pretend it's beautiful. I don't think what she has to give is worth one's self-respect. Of course, a man can't see it like that."

She hated all men in that black moment. Even Ferroll was like everybody else. The memory of their talks came back, filling her with bitterness. He might rail at the women by the roadside, but secretly he stood by them.

"Oh, you know nothing of life." Ferroll spoke in half-despair. He looked up at the set, youthful face, and his own softened. "See here," said he, "I'm thinking of Sue. It isn't fair to judge her as you're judging. If she'd had a husband who wanted her loyalty she'd have given it him. You ought to know how staunch she is. But Tom's wanted nothing from her except to be let alone. She's had to fill up her time and her heart as best she could, and she's had nothing worth while to fill them up with. It's marvellous that she's run as straight as she has. But she's strong all through. She's one of the people who could do the splendid things in life, and she would have done them if she hadn't been a woman. Think of it! All her life she's been brought up with the ideal of looking pretty and being charming to please man. If she'd only been born into the coming generation! But as for condemning her, why Susan, as she is, is worth loving, yes, and honouring!"

Memory is an uncomfortable possession. The vivifying love, and interest, and sympathy which Mrs. Ellestree had lavished on a shy and awkward business-girl were marching back in vengeful battalions. Susan was in need of friendship now: and the girl whom she had helped and warmed to life had drawn her skirts away, and from the cruel pedestal of young morality had judged her and condemned.

Mary could not speak. She was groping vainly for the light. Her piteous look touched Ferroll.

"Don't think I don't see your point of view. I do. Only Sue has been such a friend to me. You don't know how good she's been. When everybody else was slanging, I could always count on her understanding and sticking up for me. I know her faults. She irritates me at times. But it's one thing to criticise her and another to see you turning from her. It isn't fair. You know so little: and she's gone through so much. Has she ever told you how we were brought up?"

Mary shook her head. Ferroll smiled in a tender, whimsical fashion.

"No. She wouldn't. She hates pity. But I think I want you to know. It will help you to understand our greediness of joy. You may have discovered we have both great potentialities of feeling? We've the Pagan joy in life, just as life: and all it holds, too!" Ferroll stretched his arms out behind his head: his eyes were bright. "Well, God, who in a moment's carelessness gave us more than our fit share of capability of enjoyment, saw fit to make things even by planting us in a real old Puritan household—a household where there was only one thing considered wickedder than happiness, and that was beauty. Our mother was a foolish, weak little thing who cringed to my father: he was a Methodist, the real old-fashioned Methodist. My God! How we hated him! He was a minister, and the flock kept him. Don't laugh: but it hurts us when we think of the contributions. I don't mind. I've knocked about too much. But Susan—she has always hungered for a beautiful personality. She is so artistic, isn't she? Have you ever noticed how delicate her hands and ankles are, and how high her instep is? And all her tastes are just as dainty. She would cheerfully wear sacking, but she must have silk stockings. She would starve, but she must give

presents to the people who love her. Well, think of that fastidious, generous, golden temperament in the back parlour of a Methodist parson."

"You were there, too."

"I was younger than Sue: she was old enough to help me. All the little happiness I had came through her. She used to read stories to me from smuggled story-books. We used to sit in an attic where they stored blankets and unwashed calico. I can smell them now. What a wizard Grimm is! He carried us to pine forests! I shall never forget the day when I first saw those forests in his land—Germany! Later, we had Uhland; and later, Heine. What a country! All the enchantment of the world comes from it. Nowhere else has the real magic. I never see a German but I want to thank him for the gift of joy—the real simple child-joy—Germany has given to the children: and for the romance—the real magical romance—Germany has given to Youth. Oh, how we starved for both! And how fresh and clean and fragrant were the tiny draughts we stole!"

Ferroll was silent. His thoughts were back in the old days, when a little boy leaned his head against Sue's knee and was transported to wonderful lands where gingerbread huts peeped out of dark and frightening groves. When footsteps creaked on the stair, and he pressed his face against the sheltering knee: when Sue, strong and calm, took the blame and punishment.

"How I loved her! Can't you imagine what she'd be?—dear, beautiful Sue. Then Tom came. She met him at a chapel concert. I was sixteen and wretched at the prospect of slaving at a desk. Two more years' school for me was the wedding-gift she asked from Tom. I spent my holidays with them. Tom was very decent to me. He was still in love with Sue. Ye Gods! What a wife she was to him!

Poor Sue! She brought such a wealth of love and loyalty: and he didn't want it. Just think! He didn't want it. I could see that. I knew things, too, that a woman can't know. He was unfaithful . . . I don't think she knew that . . . I don't know . . . Sue has never talked of Tom, even to me. She pretended she was happy, always! pretended to *me*, who knew every look, every tone . . . Even now . . . she shields him . . . though lately . . ."

Ferroll broke off again. Mary's hands were clasped. Her breath came in odd, anguished gasps.

"Lately?"

"Oh, nothing! Only sometimes . . . I'm afraid . . . that loneliness might . . . break down . . . even Sue."

Ferroll stopped abruptly: then pulled himself up with a careless laugh.

"Well, that's all. Now perhaps you understand why we feel we've a lot owing to us! That we've been done out of the time when we ought to have had the best and keenest joys: and so, we're rather expecting now. I, particularly. Sue's a woman, and women are used to having little. Besides, Sue's been steadied by me and Tom. I've had no responsibility: only the bitterness and longing. Well, I'm making up for it! I take with both hands now: and enjoy it. Lord, how I enjoy it."

"I wish you wouldn't."

"Why? Do I frighten you?"

"I don't know. Only I don't like you when you look like that."

"Don't be silly and girl-y. Why, Mary! d'you know I never meet a person without feeling they owe me something and must give it me. I starved for sensation: warm, human feeling: that was all. I feel that hunger still. I don't believe I ever shall appease it, though I drag the heart out of the whole

far world. I *can't* let anything go by when I have the chance of grasping it. Every woman stirs me to adventure! Every atmosphere cries out to me to taste it. Every purpose calls to me to follow. Life! Life! I want it all!"

"We can't have it all! We're sent into the world to learn restraint."

"Poor Sue's learnt it."

Ferroll's gaze sought Mary's upturned countenance. The little figure in its prim blue suit, sitting stiff against the sky-line, was enormously attractive to him. Her rock-like purity made him angry with its hardness, and yet he respected it; she provoked him by her unconsciousness of his magnetism, and yet he was annoyed with himself for being provoked; he valued their comradeship, and yet some impish and adventurous instinct pricked him on to change it. The mere sight of her sent his blood leaping and turning in a thousand different eddies, and roused in him an overwhelming interest which a touch might turn to passion.

Mary was sensitive of the subtle undercurrent that was creeping underneath their brief acquaintance; she showed it in the rush of emotion with which she responded to Ferroll's plea. Susan Ellestree was still a bewildering proposition, only now that she was in Ferroll's presence she felt more tenderly to her.

Ferroll had called her hard. Her lips quivered as she answered—

"I'm sorry. I wish I hadn't spoken so. Yes. You *have* made me understand things."

"It's all right. It doesn't matter what you say to me, does it?"

Darkness was closing in: the moon, demurely white, was making a modest journey over the willow-tops.

Mary was suddenly conscious of his beauty: spare,

alert and vigorous, crouching with easy grace at her feet. His fair hair waved back tempestuously. His eyes, arresting, compelling, shone out of the darkness.

"But I'm afraid," said Mary with a rush, "afraid of Mr. Cuvier."

"You needn't be. She's had temptations before now and resisted them. She knows if she didn't she'd give herself too utterly. She can't take things like I can."

Ferroll spoke half-absently. Mary's personality was enthralling him. He put a sudden hand upon her knee.

"What should you be like if a man loved you? You wouldn't give yourself, would you?"

"I?"

"No. You'd make him want to pick you up and carry you off, just because he couldn't make you care as men want women to care for them. Give up everything, see nothing but them, think of nothing. The only way would be to lift you off your feet and blot out the world. What should you do? You'd give in, wouldn't you?"

Ferroll became a misty figure—indistinct, unreal, only his eager eyes were there, calling, calling!

And then, like a silver note, sounding bugle-wise through the glamour, came Susan's warning. "He'll pass on."

Ferroll, scamp with a saint's vision, saw the change. Reproach leaped up from his comrade's trust, leaped up and gripped him. He gave an odd little gasp that sounded almost like an oath.

"I'm a beast. Save me, Mary. I want to be friends with you. You're worth it. Only don't hold your chin up so. Look—look gentle. For heaven's sake, don't dare me. I—I don't want to try and make you care. I could. I know I could. And you don't believe I could. Be an angel. Say I could, but tell me that

it will hurt you if I do. It will. I can't stay with anybody, even you."

So spoke Ferroll to the first woman he had ever wanted, and respected.

"You've never pretended that you'll stay." Mary's words came in a hushed breath. Suddenly he was dear to her, so dear that nothing mattered but his presence. Mrs. Ellestree had always talked of love as transient; it passed, and Ferroll would pass, but why not enjoy it while it lasted?

Ferroll saw her face softening, flushing, indescribably attractive. He took his eyes away with a queer gulp.

"Don't be like the other women," he said hoarsely. "Don't snatch; it's not worth it, for you can't keep me. I love you now, but I can't stay prisoned in a woman's heart, and when I want to go I must go alone. Then you'll be left. Look at it, Mary. I'm here if you want me, but it isn't worth while. You don't know how I want to make love to you. I could make you care so much. Only—oh, save us both, dear! Show me it isn't worth while."

"It is, it is," shrilled some mad, youthful instinct; Mary clasped her hands, trying to beat it down. Then a flood of horror rushed over her, overwhelming in its revelation. Why, she was like Susan, or even Rosalys! She had wanted to snatch at love, knowing it was not real; had wanted to take the false gold, knowing the price of its bitterness—she who had condemned Susan Ellestree. She did not love Ferroll. She only loved the glamour that surrounded him—the maze of romance and adventure. He was no sheltering force in whose strength she could rest safely. He was weak; and in her soul she knew it. In his soul she felt the something lacking which she missed in Susan Ellestree.

She started to her feet in desperate desire to cut the coil of emotional entanglements: then with a sensation

of relief heard voices: the launch was returning with its load.

"They're back!"

"Yes, but you're not angry."

"No."

"And we're to keep our friendship?"

"If you like."

The dusk enfolded them in intimate security: Ferroll was close beside her. His shoulder brushed hers.

"You'll come on the river after dinner?"

Mary nodded. The people were landing. For a second a nervous hand caught hold of hers and held it tightly: then released it as the others came up.

Ferroll advanced recklessly to meet the crowd of welcoming voices, one alone of which was tinged with more surprise than pleasure. Mrs. Ellestree did not unite in the burst of ecstatic rapture which came from Rosalys. She drew Ferroll aside promptly.

"You know what I told you, Ferroll?"

Ferroll put his arm about his sister wheedlingly.

"Dear old Sue. It's all right. We've had a ripping talk—all about you. I was telling Mary about the old life when you were so good to me."

Mrs. Ellestree disengaged herself, in no way touched.

"I know those talks. No, Ferroll. I'm not pleased with you. I asked you to leave Mary alone, and you might have done that for me."

"I'm not hurting her."

Mrs. Ellestree turned her back and walked up to the house. Ferroll shrugged his shoulders. After the beautiful conversation in which he had just figured to such advantage, he felt ill-used. Besides which, town was very stuffy, and Rosalys' bungalow idyllic. He felt Sue was very selfish.

As he followed into the house, the little devil who was never long away from him began to stir engag-

ingly. Susan was perfectly ridiculous. He was going to enjoy himself!

Meanwhile Mary had sought her room, to dress hurriedly, yet with more than usual care. Colour still flamed in her cheeks. Though reason had returned to her, the stimulant of Ferroll's admiration remained, adding a new personal interest to the prospect of the evening. She put on her newest evening-frock, chosen by Mrs. Ellestree and of a virginal simplicity which emphasised her youth and slimness. "A thing of the forest and the starlight, not touched by the commotion of man's hot and turbid life"; a wind-flower fresh from Nature's hand.

They were dining on the lawn that evening; from her window Mary could see the tables, white-clothed and flower-strewn, with great crimson-shaded lamps tinting the shining napery and silver to a glowing rose-colour. Above the light, great trees towered, mysteriously dark and shadowy.

It was a warm, still night, so still that no leaf stirred. After all it was as bad to attach too little importance to beauty as too much. Mary's vision flashed back to other evening meals—cold mutton on a broken plate, eaten by the light of a single gas-jet.

And the people whom she had hated had brought this revelation of the possibilities of daily life into her ken!

She lingered at the window, half-hidden by the honeysuckle vine which flung its sweetness into the room. Ferroll had made her ashamed and penitent. He was very broad-minded: and his passionate words came back to her, stirring her pulses. Things had decidedly changed for the better since his advent. Tenderness for all humanity rose up in her heart: and most of all for the boy who was so weak and yet so altruistic: so headstrong and yet so wise. She

could never love him in the fullest sense; but his friendship was worth having.

"Oh, God, let me remember always what Ferroll has done for me! Make me tolerant . . . for his sake," whispered Mary. "Let me be worthy of his belief."

She leaned her head against the window-pane. Rosalys had come out of the house. She stood just beneath the window, pulling a rose to fix into her hair; her shoulders gleamed in the lamplight. Yes, she was a great, beautiful child, made for life's enchantment. Mary looking down on her felt a thrill of generous appreciation. How beautiful—how marvellously beautiful she was!

She felt at charity with everything around her . . . Then Fate upset the picture, turning the obverse side with chuckling malice.

The disenchantment was effected simply.

Ferroll's voice sounded underneath.

"How adorable you look."

"You don't mean to say you know I live?"

"I'm rejoicing in the fact! I'm singing pæns of thanksgiving. D'you know, I've never seen you look so beautiful! Let me do that!"

The graceful figure stood by Rosalys. His hand took the roses from her hold. Mary, wide-eyed with terror, saw their fingers touch and linger.

"You dear! Thank God for making you!" The words were breathed—scarcely aloud—but the girl's strained ears heard.

The figures moved a step into the shadow. There came a whisper, Rosalys' soft, willing laugh . . . and then . . .

She drew back suddenly, sick with anguish. Ferroll had yielded to his artistic temperament. He had kissed Rosalys . . . she had heard . . . and not once . . . not once . . .

A slim, white figure came down to dinner rather late—a figure who sat rigidly through the many courses, giving short answers to her neighbours—a figure on whom Ferroll turned perplexed glances, seeking in vain to draw her into the mirth and friendliness.

A figure which slipped away directly she might move, and who was not to be found when Ferroll followed some minutes after, not even in her room where a sympathetic housemaid ventured.

CHAPTER XI

"And lastly, he was male and she female, the everlasting fountain of interest."

R. L. S., *Weir of Hermiston*.

THE sun blazed fiercely into Clements Inn. Mary put down the cardboard box upon the table, and pushed her hair off her forehead with a dingy handkerchief. Everything was dirty up in London. She took up the string wearily and knotted it across and round. Susan had left at the flat an evening-gown, and Mary had been sent to fetch it.

It had been a hot journey, and she had had some difficulty in finding the things Susan wanted. Now it was half-past three, too late for lunch, even if she had not been too tired to have desire for food. The dog-cart was to meet the train which left Paddington at half-past five, so she had some time yet to wait. The flat afforded no refuge from the sun; all the curtains and the blinds were at the cleaner's.

Mary felt she must get out of the glare and try and find some cool tea-shop where she could wait till it was time to go to the station. She carried the box out on to the landing, and rang the lift-bell. The carpetless stairs depressed her as she waited. Everything seemed deserted; the butterflies had flown from London, leaving it a hive of sordid drudgery.

An apathetic porter at last ascended and bore her and the big cardboard box to the hot and dusty streets below. Mary still had a bewildered feeling in London, even when with Mrs. Ellestree. To-day she would

have to find her way alone, and she experienced a sense of being about to launch upon a maelstrom. She walked down the sheltered yard of the Inn and turned into the Strand. The heat was terrible. Hot and dry, the very pavements burnt her feet. She looked through the windows of the restaurants, but found none inviting. She longed for a darkened room, where there was space, and quiet, and no smart waitresses who hustled people from their places directly their cups were empty. Mrs. Ellestree always took a 'bus to Piccadilly Circus for her shopping. The tea-shops would probably be more attractive in that neighbourhood.

Mary took up her position on the kerb-stone, and after various unsuccessful efforts, found the right 'bus and entered it, wishing devoutly she had some one with her. The omnibus was crowded; Mary, squeezed between two portly ladies, felt her headache growing worse at every jolt. When the 'bus reached Piccadilly she descended to discover she was facing a great glass frontage, filled with cakes and eatables; through the swinging-doors passed a stream of people. Mary reached the threshold, and then hesitated. Every table seemed full. She did not like to walk in with the chance of discovering no seat vacant.

"Pass along, please. Pass along, please. You're blocking the way, miss."

The commissionaire held the door open. Mary discovered he was addressing her.

"I was only looking. I'll go somewhere quieter," she said.

"Then let the other folks in, miss!"

Mary's cheeks were scarlet. She turned with a bang and found herself an inch off the face of a young man, who had been waiting during the colloquy.

"Oh!" said Mary. "Oh, I beg your pardon! I—I didn't see."

"That's all right."

Surely she had heard that voice before. Mary raised her eyes, smarting now with foolish tears of weariness, and met the kindly glance of—yes it was—the young man who had come to see her at the office—Mr. Cuvier's secretary. As she looked, recognition came into his eyes also.

"Will you pass along, please?" The commissionaire's wrath was increasing. Before Mary realised what he was doing the young man put his hand on her arm and guided her through the crowd of people in the doorway to the open street, then stood looking down on her protectingly.

"It's all right. They can pass now. Were you going to get some tea?"

"It was so crowded. I didn't like to go in. I—I'm not very used to London," Mary's face was white; she stood clasping the cardboard box and looking up in sheer appeal. She dreaded seeing him depart and leaving her alone among the hurrying crowds. Her past resentment was forgotten. He showed genuine pleasure in the meeting; and she herself felt a wholly disproportionate happiness.

"It is crowded, isn't it?" Hayden Cobb's voice came with matter-of-fact soothingness. He understood the girl's feelings. London had seemed overpowering when he first came, fresh from school. "We'll go across to the Criterion. That's cool and quiet."

"Is it . . . far?"

"No; just across the Circus. I'll take care of you."

With a nod to the policeman, he saw the traffic stayed, and escorted Mary across to the friendly pavement opposite. He felt an amused pleasure in assuming the *rôle* of guide and protector to the girl who had so challenged and defied him in their memorable interview.

"Here we are," said he. They passed another

commissionaire and found themselves in a darkened lounge, where great arm-chairs stood, and tables, prettily tea-clothed, and spread with cake and china, invited occupancy.

Cobb perceived a table tucked away behind a screen, and led the way, Mary following with a sense of relief which made her lost to all convention. It was not till her companion had hung up his straw hat and sat down opposite, while an attentive waiter ran to fetch their tea, that Mary woke to a perception of the position.

A crimson flush mounted to her forehead, then embarrassment rushed over her. She looked down at her plate, more wretched now than ever. How was she to pay, and how much was it? Would he offer to? She prayed fervently he would not; yet how to offer money before him? And how was she to talk to him? On the only occasion when they had met they had been so rude to one another. The memory of his kindly pity made her sore again. His manner and appearance struck her even more forcibly to-day, he looked so well in his straw hat and grey flannels. Then she heard her companion's voice, and opened her eyes wide in sheer surprise.

"I'm so glad I've met you again. I wanted to tell you how sorry I was I didn't believe you at first. When I saw the news of Mr. Berryfield's death that evening, I understood. I nearly wrote to you."

"It didn't matter." Mary was blushing again beneath the gaze of those kind, straightforward eyes. Foolishly enough, she was remembering the dreadful, old green dress in which he had seen her. She felt comforted by the knowledge of her dainty linen frock. Now she was neat. She sent a thankful, little prayer to Mrs. Ellestree who had transformed her.

"It did matter. It made you feel sore; it would have made me. It's good of you not to bear malice."

A smile appeared in the girl's eyes, then vanished. The waiter had set the teapot on the table, and had laid down a bill beside the young man.

Mary's heart beat suffocatingly. Hayden Cobb was feeling in his pocket. She bent forward in desperate appeal.

"Oh, please let me pay for mine!" she gasped. "It's my tea. I mean—I shall feel so awful."

Hayden Cobb's brow knitted in surprise. To let her pay was so against all canons of masculine chivalry that Mary's terror seemed to reflect in some way on him. Then he saw her quivering mouth and realised her agitation.

"Do let me," said he. "It's such a pleasure to have some one to talk to. Meals are rather a dreary affair when one lives alone. Besides, I invited you here." He put the money in the waiter's hand: Mary sat wretched, not knowing what to say. He took up the teapot. "Now how do you like it? Or would you rather pour it out for yourself?"

"I—I don't mind," said Mary.

"Weak or strong, then?"

"Strong," said Mary, "that is——" Good heavens, if it came out weak. Yes; weak was safer. Suddenly the tears came into her eyes. The heat had tried her utterly: and the sense of obligation was too much for her.

"Why, what's the matter?"

Cobb put down the teapot in alarm.

"Oh, if you'd only let me pay," gasped Mary. "I—I can't drink it unless you do. I really can't."

The young man looked at her for a moment so astonished that he could not answer, then he understood. He put out his hand in a common-sense manner.

"Of course, if you'd rather."

"How much is it?"

"A shilling."

Mary put a shilling in his hand, he slipped it in his waistcoat pocket.

"I shall keep this as a memento," he said. "Now it's your tea, so make it yourself just as you like it."

Mary caught the friendly twinkle and suddenly smiled back. Confidence had come to her.

"It's so dreadfully hot!" She spoke half-apologetically.

"Yes. You look as if the sea would do you good."

"I'm staying at a house on the river near Cookham."

"How jolly!"

Mary drank her tea, but reserved assent. Her lips had tightened rather Puritanically.

"Don't you like the river?"

"Not very much."

"I'm awfully keen on it. I punt a good deal. My chief is down there."

Mary's cheeks flamed suddenly.

"Mr. Cuvier?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing—well, at least——" Mary hesitated, torn between honesty and discretion; then blurted out the fact, "Mr. Cuvier is staying with us."

"Mr. Cuvier!"

The amazement in the young man's voice was unmistakable. Mary had not impressed him as a girl who would be on visiting terms with people who knew Mr. Cuvier. His eye fell on the smart linen frock and French hat; he realised Mary had vastly improved in her appearance. She was almost pretty. He looked again at the grey eyes, clouded now with ill-suppressed dislike, and decided it was the most changeable face he had ever seen, a face he could not keep his eyes off.

"I hope you have altered your opinion of him," he said. "Do you remember how we quarrelled?"

You would have made me angry if I'd thought you meant it."

"I did mean it." Mary's lips came together in a tight line.

"But what on earth possesses Berryfield's?" Cobb was staring at her in genuine perplexity. "What have we done to you? Upon my soul, these last three months Berryfield's seems to have gone mad with hate of Cuvier's as its form of lunacy. Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know what your firm's been doing."

"I don't. I haven't been there since the day you saw me. I haven't even heard about anything."

"You've left?"

Mary hesitated; then nodded. She *had* left—at present.

"Have you got a berth in London then?"

"Oh, no. I'm living with my aunt."

"I'm so glad."

"Why?"

Mary's surprise at the relief in the man's voice rather confused him.

"Oh, I dunno. A man never likes to see a girl working for her living."

"Pity that a man doesn't keep the girl, then."

"He might be very glad to if she'd let him."

Heated argument on any relationship between the sexes has an unfortunate knack of becoming personal—the more unwitting, the more embarrassing. Anger may have been the cause of the flush which dyed Mary's face at Cobb's impersonal words: it certainly lent brightness to the eyes which looked back at him with precisely the old insolence.

"Some girls are fortunately independent of man's kindness. What did you mean by your remarks on Berryfield's?"

Mary was herself again: the frightened country mouse had vanished, and in her place was the alert

and independent young woman who had first won Cobb's liking; yet so strangely inconsistent is man, he did not appreciate the change. What is more, he had the audacity to say so.

"Hang Berryfield's. What does it matter? I want to forget that wretched day. I'd so much rather think of you doing nothing but just going on the river and enjoying yourself and resting. Tell me what you do all day."

Cobb had received some lively glances on the "wretched day" referred to: they were mild and playful compared to the lightning that flashed across the table now.

"You would rather think of me doing nothing all day long! I dare say you would; I dare say, indeed, you would. But it's pretty cowardly to say so."

"Cowardly? Good gracious"—as the almost forgotten recollection of her foolish boasts came back to him—"you don't think I want you out of the way? It's too silly. 'Pon my honour, I'd entirely forgotten how you bragged about the things you were going to do. No, I didn't," hastily, as the storm-light gathered, "I thought it splendid of you. I liked your impud—p—pluck. You don't know how often I've remembered you. Only—to imagine I attached any consequence to it is ridiculous. I was simply thinking of yourself, when I spoke, yourself as a girl."

"Can't a girl be of consequence, then?"

"Rather!" Cobb's eyes spoke more plainly than he knew. "Only in another sort of way. Please don't talk about Berryfield's and Cuvier's. We shall never agree there."

"*Never.*" Something inexplicable and choking came into Mary's throat, she felt an extraordinary depression. It was quite true, they never could agree. Finality is always cheerless.

But as the subject which this boy in his ignorance

thought trivial was the pivot of her whole life, it was useless to stray into the pretty paths of a friendship which could never ripen. Also, duty clamoured, a shrill sentinel. She must sound him about Berryfield's.

So a stern young woman clasped her hands on the table, and said in a resolute voice, which yet had the slightest quiver in it—

"As it happens, that is the only subject which interests me. I am in earnest. Please tell me what you mean by saying Berryfield's is mad."

For a young man who took no interest in women, viewing them coldly as foolish and unprofitable investments in the exchange of life, Mr. Cobb was unreasonably irritated at Mary's insistence on keeping the conversation to impersonalities. This was doubly odd, as he was singularly devoid of curiosity about his fellows. His father had been an officer in the Army, who had died in action when Hayden was a boy at school, and since then it had been borne in on him through bitter experience that no one cares very much for the dreams and hopes of anybody else. So he had set his teeth together and plunged grimly into the drudgery of office-work, intent on one thing only, to get a solid grip on the material things of life.

The only person for whom he had any deep attachment was Simeon Cuvier, and for him he felt more than the usual compound of loyalty, respect and admiration which is experienced by a young man to a storm-battered and brilliant man of the world. Simeon Cuvier had stood by the boy in one of the biggest crises of his life: and had helped him, not only materially, but by complete understanding. To serve Cuvier was his only pleasure and ambition.

Therefore, attracted as he was to Mary, he did not care to identify her with the firm which was displaying such bitter enmity to Cuvier. The scanty encouragement which his overtures of friendship had

received stung his pride, however; and he replied in as cool a voice as Mary's.

"Your friend Sanders continues to be busy, that's all."

"Sanders!"

The terror in the girl's face was so vivid that the man relented instantly.

"Oh, it's all right. We know exactly what he's up to: he can't hurt us. He's only cutting his own throat."

There was an unaffected confidence in Hayden Cobb's manner, which made his hearer turn cold; he noticed her change of colour.

"Has the sun tired you?"

Mary nodded. She could not speak. What was Sanders up to?

"Will you have some brandy?"

She pulled herself together with a start. In her present nervous state the possibility of his guessing at the truth seemed imminent. She spoke hurriedly.

"No, no. I've been ill, you know. I had brain-fever. And seeing you has made me think about all the things I've been forbidden to think about."

"Don't say that. I didn't want to talk of business. I said so."

"No. Only, when one has been away for so long, one can't help wondering."

"How've they got on without you?"

Mary nodded in good faith, then saw the lurking twinkle in his eyes, and cast a furious glance—

"You're always laughing at me!"

"You must admit you bring it on yourself." Cobb's voice was brotherly in its protectiveness, though humour still remained in it. "No one's quite so important as——"

"As I think I am?" Lightning from the opposite side of the table.

"Say it. You think me an absurdly conceited idiot?"

Cobb cast a cautionary look around the room, then spoke with an odd tightening of his breath.

"You'd be much angrier if I told you what I did think."

"That I think that I'm important?"

"That you are!"

His eyes met Mary's, there was a silence inexpressibly dear, tumultuous and unnerving. Mary had prayed for Romance, it had touched her with Ferroll's bewildering entrance on the scene, and behold, its wings were again circling round her in dusty Piccadilly. An entirely strange young man had told her she was important to him!

A very tame event to an experienced emotion-alist, but these young people were quite unversed in sentiment.

Mary's reception of the compliment exposed her inexperience. She turned quite white and said:

"Oh, is it awful my having tea with you?"

"Good gracious, no! We're business people."

"But I'm not now."

"Yes, you are. We made friends in business, anyhow."

"Friends?"

A wintry little smile hovered in her eyes as the memory of that spirited interview came back to her.

Cobb returned the smile, but nodded his head, too.

"Friends," he repeated; "I want you to keep feeling that. And if there's ever anything I can do for you, write to me at Cuvier's. Now you will, won't you? I'm not joking. I mean it."

"I haven't many friends," said Mary, "I've been too busy."

Hayden Cobb felt the same queer feeling of

protectiveness come over him; he was not an emotional man, but he wanted to take care of this forlorn, defiant little person, whose eyes were so grey and so honest, and whose mouth was so provokingly determined; to take care of her and annoy her, and see her looking up at him with a sudden downfall of all her weapons, just as she did now.

We have said Mary was not used to sentiment: the look in Cobb's eyes made her get up very quickly.

"I must be going," said she. "You've been very kind. I do feel friends."

"That's right," said Cobb. "Keep on feeling it." He had risen, too, and stood looking down at her as if he could not see enough of her. "And let me know if you come through town before you go back to Birmingham. I'd be so glad if you'd let me take you out to lunch. I'm pretty busy at the office, but I can always manage an hour or so at lunch-time."

"Oh," said Mary, "and I've kept you!"

Cobb took down his hat.

"Not a bit. Where are you going?"

"Paddington. I've to be there at half-past five."

"You'll only just do it." He was looking at his watch. He snapped it, and slipped it back into his pocket.

"If I miss it! The dog-cart was to meet it. They'll be so angry."

Mary was hurrying to pull out the cardboard box. He took it from her in a delightfully taking-it-for-granted fashion.

"But you're not going to miss it. Hansom, please." They were at the door. A swift-flying hansom drew up with a jingle on the kerb-stone. "Get in!" His hand helped her. He turned his face up to the driver: "Paddington!" Then to Mary's terror and delight, he ascended to the place beside her.

"But you're not coming. You mustn't."

"We'll see."

"But I can manage perfectly."

"I'm going to put you right into that train," said Cobb with invincible determination. "You've no business to be finding your way about London by yourself. We'd have you getting to the wrong platform, and you've only just time."

"It's so kind," murmured Mary, and forbore to protest. Somehow she felt sure she would catch the train, if he came with her; but by herself, turned adrift in a crowd of cab-drivers and porters! Mary resigned herself with unaffected relief to the capable direction of her new-found friend. The fact that they had met in her Birmingham office seemed to give their acquaintance a home-like feeling. Her native city was growing very dear to her in this overpowering wilderness of elaborate sentimental women, and wicked brutal men, all of them possessed of such knowledge, such clever tongues, and such contempt for the Provinces.

Men and women jostled past in a tumultuous stream. It was hot, but Mary's spirits were unaccountably high. Life rolled out in gay pageantry. The sunbeams sparkled in her eyes. She held her head erect, and smiles flashed in and out of her serious face.

To both of them the day was marked out from the general round. A day when in the midst of strife and frenzy of their business world, Romance came with its banners flying, its spear-heads sparkling, to the intoxication of youth's music, the rhythm and the swing of it.

Great purpose, high standards, strenuous endeavour held these two, but youth's voice sang louder still; and the day which outwardly had little to distinguish it, left these young people with beating pulses and a sense of new-born joy in life.

When Mary had bidden a shy good-bye through her third-class carriage-window, she carried with her the memory of a firm hand-clasp and a comforting

voice that said, "You'll be all right now." This was not quite accurate, for Cobb's words about Sanders had filled her full of fear; but the fact that she had met the attractive secretary from Cuvier's again and had discovered she was "important" to him, was an alleviation in her brimming cup of worry.

As the train whirled along, she leaned her head against the dusty cushions with a queer sensation of relief. It was a comfort to feel there were people in the world whom one might trust absolutely. She had only seen him twice, but she knew that Hayden Cobb was a tower of strength.

CHAPTER XII

"Be a man and fold me with thine arm!"

R. BROWNING, *A Woman's Last Word*.

"She was a miller's daughter:
She lived beside the mill!
Thick were the flies on the water,
But she-e was thicker still!"

THE vulgar words came lilting through the still night-air; a banjo was twanging, voices and laughter made a pleasant undercurrent. They were all out upon the lawn, grouped like a camp, fantastic in the moonlight. Between the willow-branches Mary could see the picture, the moonbeams gleaming on the naked shoulders of the women, sparkling draperies slipping on to dew-wet grass, cigarette smoke trailing through the darkness, weighted with the scent of flowers. Mary's eyes turned in sick disgust from where the young actor lay on the rug at Rosalys' feet, his head upon her knee, while she leant over him stroking the waves of his wheat-coloured hair; turned to fall on a more disturbing sight—two figures sitting apart from the others—Mrs. Ellestree in a black gown of provoking chastity and a great leonine figure, lithe and lazy, stretched beside her, his sleepy eyes fixed on her.

Restless the summer night, full of scents and whispers, which called insistently to waking senses fanning them into overpowering dominance. A dangerous night for Pagan consciences!

Mary was sitting in the deserted launch. She had

escaped directly after dinner. If she had avoided Ferroll the night before, how much more did she feel repelled now after her experience in town. She was ashamed of the fascination he had exercised over her and still exercised to some extent. The mystification in his glances touched her. He looked so boyish and so hurt, as if a trusted comrade had suddenly deserted him. She had deserted him. In her heart she knew she judged him more hardly because she contrasted him with Cobb. She had to recall Rosalys firmly. She had been lifted out of the atmosphere of self-indulgence; had taken in a breath of keen and bracing air. Her face blushed in the darkness at the thought of Cobb among these people. How he would detest them! He belonged to a different class: quiet, well-bred simple people of clean ideals and strict code of honour. He was matter-of-fact, good, upright. She trusted him with her whole heart, there was no feverish uncertainty about him: she rested in his kindness. Her thoughts turned to him irresistibly through dinner. She had scarcely heard Ferroll's pleading whispers. She was thrilling with excitement, but it was the excitement of the soldier who hears the first faint bulgle-notes warning him of danger.

Hayden Cobb had reminded her of Berryfield's and Sanders, and the myriad responsibilities that were waiting. As she sat there, she was determining to return. She was much better now, and she would not stay on in Rosalys' house. It went too much against the grain.

Her devotion to Mrs. Ellestree had brought her here, but Berryfield's came first. If Berryfield's needed her, she must go. Cobb had not approved of girls working: she raised her head, stimulated and mischievous; she wanted to go back and fight! Wanted to win . . . to show her mettle. She wanted to crush Cuvier's: her hate of the man was mixed with an unacknowledged tinge of jealousy. He was

utterly immoral and unscrupulous: yet the two people whose opinion she valued, and whose strength she looked up to most, had fallen captive to his dominance. She would not surrender so weakly. She had the power to hurt this man and she would use it.

To Birmingham in the morning! She had decided it. With her hands clasping her knees she sat in her *cache*, thrilled with anticipation of the business fight, whose forces she would lead again to-morrow. The sensuous indolence which she was leaving became of small importance. Her ears were filled with the clash of steel; her eyes with intricate problems. She was no longer a girl, miserable in her pure and outraged maidenhood; no longer a woman insulted by a man's easily-transferred affection: no longer an idealist, waking to the bitter knowledge that idols may falter in self-restraint and wisdom. She was the head of Berryfield's, the ruler of an industry!

Power is a great anodyne. To some natures a complete one. Mary had too much loyalty in her composition to be able to cut free entirely from personal ties.

Voices came rudely into her dream, and its glory departed. She was again a wretched heart-torn moralist, watching evil overtaking and corrupting those whom she held dearest.

Two people had come down to the bank. She was concealed from them by the willow-trees which swept the water: but though she was in shadow they were in bright moonlight. They were Mrs. Ellestree and Cuvier.

They talked for a few moments, ectasising on the beauty of the night. Every word came to her—the idle words fringed with hidden meaning when a man and woman are slipping steadily into the abyss of an intrigue.

Cuvier put out his foot and touched the punt-side: then dropped lightly into it. He knelt down feeling the cushions.

"They're not damp. It's so warm and dry to-night. Still I think you ought to have something with you in case it gets colder on the water. It would be a bore to have to come in."

"You talk as if we were going to have an all-night sitting!"

Cuvier looked up, half-kneeling in the punt. His silence was more meaning than any words could be.

"I don't think I'll come."

Mrs. Ellestree spoke tremulously. She stood uncertainly upon the banks, her black gown sheathing the fair whiteness of her shoulders. Never had she looked more completely beautiful.

"Oh, yes, you will."

"Why should I?"

"Because I want you."

There was passion in the man's voice—savage, brutal.

"I thought you never wanted . . . women."

"I said—not often—I want you as a starving man wants bread, or a drunkard brandy. Will that satisfy you?"

Susan Ellestree lifted her face to the stars. Joy played round her illumining and glorifying. The cup was offered to her: all her senses cried to her to take it. She had roused desire in this man: he had avowed it: he bowed before her, pleading.

"Don't let's waste all the night, or the other will come down on us. Tell me where I can find something."

"I'll go."

"Let me."

"You'd bring something hideous." With a laugh, Mrs. Ellestree started up to the lawn.

Cuvier settled the cushions in the punt, pulled a

cigarette out, and struck a light. The match flared up, throwing a momentary radiance on the boat-house. His eyes met Mary's.

The match dropped in the water with a hiss. Cuvier took a meditative step down the punt and knelt to untie it from the launch.

"A nice evening, Miss van Heyten," he said pleasantly.

Mary did not answer. Her hands were clenched on either cushion.

"I wonder if you could help me to untie this. If you would be so kind as to hold a match?"

Mary's breath came quickly. Cuvier was standing waiting. In spite of herself, she moved unwillingly towards him.

"So kind of you!" Cuvier struck a light. "Will you hold it, so?"

Mary's face was illumined. Cuvier's half-shut eyes saw, while they apparently were bent upon the rope. The match flamed down to her finger-tips. She relinquished it with a start of pain.

"Have you burnt yourself?"

"It doesn't matter."

"But it does. Let me see."

Another light shone out. Cuvier was not looking at the hand he held. "You don't seem to be putting in a very good time here."

The hand struggled.

"I should advise you to go up to the others. It isn't good for any one to sit out in the damp. Makes one morbid. Take my advice!" Cuvier relinquished her hand easily.

"I'm afraid I don't fit in with them." Mary's voice came stifflingly.

"Why not?" Amusement sounded in the level tone. Mary heard. Her throat was dry. The passionate defiance could find but poor expression.

"I'm a business person."

Cuvier looked through the darkness at her, not unkindly. The moonbeams shone serenely on her white face, wretched against the willow-shadows.

"Want to get back to harness."

"I'm not allowed to!"

Mary's hands were clasped, trying in vain to keep calm. A smile flickered momentarily round Cuvier's mouth. He guessed it would not be easy to escape from Susan Ellestree's firm rule. Was he not here? He felt a tinge of comradeship for the other worker, prisoned in this pleasure-garden.

"I sympathise, but if you can't see your way to leaving, it would be wise to make the best of it."

"One can't make good out of evil."

"Evil!"

Cuvier's lips curled unsympathetically. He looked down on her with barely concealed insolence.

"You don't call spades tea-spoons, Miss van Heyten. So refreshing to meet young people who still diatribe. Which of us is bound for the Bottomless Pit? or is an excursion starting?"

Miss van Heyten returned his gaze with fully adequate expression. Cuvier met the glance, and felt a fighting spirit rising up in him. This was no bread-and-butter school-girl to be cowed by ridicule.

Yet prepared as he was for the clash of steel, the onslaught astonished him.

"You have been bankrupt once, Mr. Cuvier, I have a feeling you will soon repeat the process. It won't be so easy to rise again at fifty."

It was a chance shot; it must be a chance shot; yet it fell home. Its unexpectedness left him speechless.

"Then perhaps you'll understand the feeling of being in a world where there's no place for you. I hope you will. It won't be my fault if . . ." The words broke off shortly.

"May I ask the reason of your flattering zeal?"

Silence.

Cuvier struck another match and held it up deliberately.

"When I have enemies I always like to meet them face to face," he said in accents whose humour had returned. "Especially such a powerful one!"

The words had an extraordinary effect; the flickering light showed a pale face, staring at him as though he placed his finger on its secret.

Then the sound of a snatch of song made them both turn quickly.

Susan Ellestree was coming across the grass, the boat-house shielded them momentarily, in another minute she would see them.

One of those unexpected deeds of kindness that shot up through Cuvier's life without reason or warning, entered now. The girl had insulted him, but her foolish gibe struck him as the frenzied anguish of a little rat against the wall. He had too great a contempt for her personality to take her seriously, yet he was sorry for her. She was so tragically impotent. He spoke quickly.

"Miss Heyten. I'm really rather sorry for you. You're up against too stiff a proposition. If you ever have the pluck to clear out, come to me. I'll find you a job. I must go now. Mrs. Ellestree will see us. But here's my card."

With a swift stroke Cuvier sent the punt along the bank. It was at the steps as Mrs. Ellestree appeared.

Mary was left clasping a small white card, more angry than she had ever been. Cuvier had pitied her. Cuvier had offered to find her work—to help her! And before her very eyes, the drama in which he played so terrible a part was being acted!

He had lifted Mrs. Ellestree into the punt, his arms did not at once relinquish her. She extricated herself.

"Hush! That's forbidden!"

"Nonsense."

To the girl's fancy, his voice sounded with brutal loudness, defying, mocking. He was absolutely regardless of her presence, as if she were too insignificant to be treated with common decency.

"I shall be afraid to go out with you."

"Don't say that. Have the courage of your wishes! I insist on fulfilling the demands of my nature—the sinful clamorous nature that God in His humour bestowed upon me. Have like courage. Be a fellow-sinner."

The words were bold, the voice bolder. Cuvier was on accustomed ground. He had not patience with the humours of his prey, no sense of privacy, the whole world might see him make off with this woman. Mary's presence mattered nothing to him. Indeed he had forgotten it.

"But I don't want to be a sinner, they go to such unpleasant places."

"Under plane-trees!"

"Spidery plane-trees!"

"Whither thou goest . . . Come along, Mrs. Ellestree."

The voice was careless in its authority.

Susan sank down on the cushions with a lilting laugh.

"Whither thou goest . . . take me, then!"

Joy rang through the accents. Who would dash the cup from one so piteously eager, so piteously exalted?

Cuvier slung the pole by his side, then took up a paddle.

The punt began to move.

"Not far."

Cuvier said nothing; he paddled with swift, slow strokes, into the black shadows of the sweeping plane-tree. The ripples settled into stillness.

Mary sat motionless. She was powerless. If she had had wisdom, wit, experience, she might have

influenced Cuvier. She had prayed to save the woman whom she loved; chance had given her an opportunity, and found her tongue-tied, foolish, impotent. How could she cope with these people? She could but tell them they were wicked, and they laughed at her! She lifted her face in a mad rush of entreaty! Surely the Power from whom came all instincts of purity and goodness could help the woman He had created.

"Oh, God, you made her good! Keep her good! Take care of her!"

The prayer was to receive swift answer that night, at any rate. Cuvier's impatience might have been forewarned. Hardly had the plane-tree's leaves subsided into immovability, when voices calling sounded in the garden.

"Cuvier . . . Cuvier . . . Hullo there!" Footsteps came running down the lawn.

"Cuvier . . . a messenger from town! . . . Important!"

Mary leant forward in the launch, curious, excited. Far down the bank she saw the plane-tree's branches parting; the punt came forward. Cuvier jumped on to the bank, leaving Mrs. Ellestree to tie it to the rail. He was striding forward.

"It's all right, thanks! I see him." A well-known voice sounded behind. She looked around. Between the willow-branches she saw Cobb's strong young figure advancing, the other man stopping abruptly as if impatient of the interruption.

"Well?"

"Reich has wired to say he won't grant a day's extension. He's sold the second option to Sanders of Berryfield's."

"What! They did get wind of it."

"Yes, sir. They've done more. If they'd been making any tests they couldn't have concealed the fact. They've made none. They've tapped ours."

"The damned thieves. Well, we have still ten days. The report of the last test should be in by then."

"It isn't certain. You see, that was the information Sanders bought. I feel it's my fault to some extent. If I'd seen Sanders . . ."

"It would have done no good. Berryfield's is a nest of scum like him. Such men aren't kept in decent firms. We sent them proof of what he is, and he's still there. Never mind; they haven't won yet. If the test is right, we'll close in time, anyhow we'll make a fight for it." Cuvier drew his watch out.

The boy's voice rang tersely. "There's a train up at 10.15."

"It's just ten."

"We could make it, if we ran."

"Yes. Perhaps it would be better. We could go down to the works and see how the tests shape. As time's important now, they must work double night-shifts. We can put on extra men to-night. We shall be there by twelve. In good form for a sprint?"

"Rather!"

"We'll slip out by the side-gate. This way."

The footsteps passed. The men had gone. The syren's voice had pierced through the passion-scented air, and her devotees were hurrying to her, caught up resistlessly, though love waited on the very point of yielding. A few minutes since, Cuvier waited on Susan's accents. Now Susan's very memory was swept from the minds of those whose life she had been dominating.

From the busy world, the syren shrieked, and Cuvier had obeyed without a second's hesitation.

While Mary . . .

Terror stared out of the rushes. Terror white-face, wide-eyed. Berryfield's disgraced! Berryfield's name blazoned in infamy abroad, while its guardian rested all unconscious, out of sight and call.

She got up mechanically, her brain was dazed and numb. The shock had obliterated everything.

One thought only grew out of the blinding dark, one thought like a tongue of fire.

She must go . . . to the helm.

CHAPTER XIII

"... the laughing loves
Around thy base, no longer pause and press?
... about thy rim
Scull-things in order grim,
Grow out, in graver mood, obey the sterner stress?"
R. BROWNING, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*.

SUNLIGHT in Mrs. Ellestree's room; sunlight on the gay chintz-covered dressing-table, loaded with its glittering panoply of silver; sunlight lying in streaks on the white bed-spread and glinting on the breakfast-tray, and even adventuring to Mrs. Ellestree's face, propped up against a muslin-covered, ribbon-threaded pillow. Here the sunbeams found no welcome, so stopped to flicker mockingly on the myriad little lines and hollows which no smiles sent driving into dimples.

"But, my dear child, why do you propose to go like this?"

"I must go back to the office."

"You aren't to think of work for months. What has put it into your head?"

"I can't tell you. I must go."

The girl's eyes met the woman's squarely. Mrs. Ellestree realised her rule of might was over. Yesterday she had stood in unquestioned sovereignty; now all was slipping.

She had drunk deep from bitterness last night while she waited for Cuvier's return, deeper still when

she sought the house to find that he had gone without a word; and though the wire that had come this morning brought consolation, the sleepless night had left her ill-prepared for Mary's pronouncement of desertion.

"And you won't tell me the reason?"

Mary laid her hand upon the bed-rail, fingering it nervously. If Mrs. Ellestree had not known Cuvier, she would have confided in her, but some instinct warned her into prudence. A homely saying of Mr. Berryfield's flashed through her head with sudden force. "When in doubt, keep your mouth shut." It was as if he stood by her speaking. Her gaze looked past Mrs. Ellestree, her mouth closed in a firm line. So might Joan of Arc have looked, defying her persecutors.

"No, I can't."

"Just as you like, dear; if you really feel you ought not to tell me I won't question. But you mustn't go quite so suddenly!"

Susan Ellestree was a marvellously just woman. If Mary wished to guard a secret, she would not stoop to tease her for it, only she must point out wisdom!

"If you run off like this, it will be so rude to Rosalys."

"I don't understand."

"You have made it evident to everybody that you have not been very happy here."

"I can't help that."

Tears were near—smarting, anguished tears. No, she had not been happy. She had been hurt—bitterly, foully hurt.

"You might have helped showing it so plainly, dear."

Mrs. Ellestree spoke with a gentle reproof which made the girl feel disagreeably guilty.

"I think it is my duty to disapprove of . . . of people like . . . Miss Benton."

"But not when you are staying in Rosalys' house. Oh, my dear, I know it's only youth and ignorance; but you can't expect other people, who don't know you as well as I do, to trouble to find excuses for you. I can't tell you how your behaviour has hurt me. I hate people to get such a wrong impression of you."

"If everybody hates me, I should think that's all the more reason why I had better go."

Mary's face was afire; she turned her head away, choking, mortified.

"No. It's all the more reason why you should stay and make everybody love you as I do. They are all ready to, if you'd only let them." Mrs. Ellestree stretched out her hand. Mary took a step towards her suddenly.

"I'm not going because I want to leave you. I do feel grateful . . . to you. I do love you."

"Of course you do." Mrs. Ellestree leant her face against the girl's flushed cheek. "I know you do. Rosalys does behave foolishly. I couldn't do the things that she does. But there's no real harm in her. She's only an overgrown baby, with the kindest heart in the world. There's lots of good in Rosalys. Try and see it. It will make you ever so much happier to look for the good there is in people instead of wanting to form them all into one patern. Gentleness and cheerfulness, these come before all morality. Don't judge, Mary! Think of the difference circumstances make in people's characters."

"Oh, that's it!" Mary looked up passionately. "It's her life that makes her as she is. I see that. It's the dreadful idleness. But that doesn't make one enjoy being with her; nor right to be like her."

For some unexplained reason Mrs. Ellestree coloured.

"Who is to say what is right? Rosalys gives out more love and kindness than thousands of church-

going women. I would rather be like her than most of the women I know. Women are so small and so intolerant."

"Oh, don't be like her; don't be like her."

Mary held on to Mrs. Ellestree's hand in a rush of terror.

"You silly baby. I'm like myself and no one else! There!" Mrs. Ellestree kissed the little, tear-wet face pressed close against her. "Now take your hat off, and then you may come back and——"

"But I'm going."

"Going?"

Mrs. Ellestree loosened her hand; there was a moment's silence, then the words came rather hardly.

"Mary. I don't often ask people to do anything for me. But if I ask you to stay . . . to help me."

"Help you?" Mary turned her face with a dawning light in it, her voice was hushed to a reverent whisper.

"Yes. Do you know what people will say if you go now, like this? They'll say I sent you, or that you left because you had discovered something against me."

Mrs. Ellestree struggled with herself, then laid her hand on Mary's. "I don't talk about myself very often, do I?"

"No."

"It—it isn't easy for me to tell people things, and especially you. I wanted you to be so happy. I hated to think of you knowing I was sad. I haven't the best of husbands. Perhaps you guessed that?"

Mary nodded mutely.

Mrs. Ellestree took a deep breath. It was hard indeed to speak. The bulwarks of her pride stood high.

"Tom has never made a friend of me, you see. He despises women. He likes to kiss me, and that's all. Never to talk, never to give his confidence. His work

is quite apart from me, it always has been. Oh, Mary, it isn't pleasant to live with some one who thinks of you as a sort of household animal, to be fed and occasionally petted, but never treated as a being with a brain or soul. Well, that's my tragedy. Any woman with a pretty face would fill my place as well as I do. Better, perhaps. Tom never has pretended any very overpowering affection for me. He doesn't need women in his life. He's so keen on his work and clubs. He's a man's man."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you, dear."

Mrs. Ellestree held the hot, small hand in hers in a grateful clasp.

"You've helped me a lot by your little girl's love. I've wanted to have children, only Tom—well, he's too concerned about his creature comforts. He hates domesticity. But I've liked to pretend that you're my daughter."

"I love you as much."

"Oh, my dear, I need you."

Susan's eyes were wet. She brushed her face against the pillows, trying to laugh.

"Women are so silly. They never can talk without crying. Well, you understand now, how much friendship means to me. Mr. Cuvier is going to be a great friend of mine; he's come into my life just when the loneliness was becoming almost unbearable."

Mary's heart grew cold.

"He cares for me as I've always longed to be cared for. I can't tell you what his affection means. There's no need to be afraid. I am not going to do anything silly. Only I have just had a wire from him, asking me to meet him in town to-night, and dine, and have a talk: and you see how bad it will look if I go back and stay all night in the flat alone."

Mary was silent; memory was dancing mockingly before her: the quiet river rippled past with a rocking

punt, and a man standing in it holding some one . . . their heads together . . . he had kissed the woman, she was sure of it. Friendship! It would not stop there: the future opened yawningly. She shuddered, but could say no word: horror and compassion fought within her.

"Mary, you must come with me. I really need your help. You'll do this one thing for me, because you love me."

Susan Ellestree's voice came quickly, feverishly. Mary's silence chilled her. If she should not come!

Until that moment, Mrs. Ellestree had not understood how much Mary's affection meant to her. She realised she counted on it, as she counted on Ferroll's love. Ferroll had grown up now and was sometimes critical: but Mary's faith and worship had been as implicit as the old-time trust of the little brother whom Susan once had "mothered."

And just as the child's love had filled her starved girlhood, so had Mary's love come to cheer her lonely wifehood.

Lately Mrs. Ellestree had been conscious of a faint chill in Mary's manner. Now she read condemnation in her silence.

She was right in her intuition. Youth sees all things in uncompromising distinctness.

"I could not help you to meet Mr. Cuvier."

The words fell like a bolt from empty skies. Mrs. Ellestree was ignorant that Mary had witnessed the scene on the river-bank: equally far from her mind had been the idea that Mary had noticed anything, or noticing, would judge. Mary to disapprove of her, the woman who had been her philosopher and guide; who had lectured, encouraged, moulded her! The situation was . . . was monstrous. We have said that Mrs. Ellestree was a proud woman: one quality however was stronger than her pride, and that was her dependence on the affection of those she loved.

That Mary dared to pit her puny judgment against hers, angered her in some degree, but that Mary had apparently cut loose from the ties of worshipping affection overwhelmed all other feelings.

"You don't mean that you don't love me, Mary?"

"I am not going to help you meet Mr. Cuvier!"

Hard is youth!

Impulsively it makes its idols, snatching poor humans willy-nilly from their fellow-mortals to erect them on pedestals that stretch into the skies. There they must stand, clothed in a glorious golden light which emanates from youth's idealism. But when the golden-light becomes dulled by use, should youth's keen eyes perceive a flaw in the whiteness, should it perceive the smallest human imperfection—Heavens! what a wailing and gnashing of teeth!

The idol is human: it has dared to have a human weakness. What treachery! What disillusionment! Down with a crash from its pedestal! Sweep away the fragments! There is a bitter pleasure in completely clearing false gods from one's world.

Mary closed her heart to all appeal. She had been taken in by that earnest voice, that wealth of tenderness: it was tainted now. The Mrs. Ellestree whom she had worshipped was wicked: her wise kindness was hypocritical.

She had let Mr. Cuvier kiss her, and was going up to dine with him; worst of all, she wanted Mary to help her in the intrigue.

There was no mercy in the youthful eyes. Hard is youth!

"Is that your answer?"

Mary bent her head. Mrs. Ellestree caught what shreds of dignity were left to her, and kept back the tears which came near to betray her. Mary had condemned her absolutely, without even giving her a hearing.

"You don't want to hear what I have to say?"

"It would be useless."

"Oh, I wasn't going to plead with you. Don't be afraid. If the love you profess for me amounts to no more than that, I don't want to justify myself to you. I won't pretend I'm not disappointed, but I don't want to tell you anything."

"What can there be to tell?" Mary turned half-wavering. Susan's dignified acceptance of her attitude made her feel uneasy. Supposing there were extenuating circumstances?

"You know I don't want to think badly of you. I . . . I had forgiven you for last night, even. I saw you when you went off in the punt. But after that—to go up to town to dine with him—oh, there can be no excuse for that."

"Who is making excuses?" Mrs. Ellestree raised a regal head. "I have no desire to. If you had loved me, you would have grieved for my sorrow, felt joy in my joy."

"Joy! It is a sin. Yes, sin! You oughtn't to even speak to Mr. Cuvier—you're married."

"Be silent! You know nothing! You have only the conventional morality. You are untouched by life."

"I will not be a cloak for you."

"Don't be so absurd. I asked you to come because I wanted you with me to help me—yes, help me by your trust and love. It would have helped me if you had given it me when I asked for it. But instead you've talked like a district visitor. It has chilled me. I wouldn't take you now."

Reproach was on her tongue, but she forbore to use it. She was very generous; even in a bitter hour like this, she did not remind Mary of all the "benefits forgot" which Susan Ellestree had lavished on her. Poor recompense she had now!

Mary's conscience pricked her. She fought down remorse, fearing lest it should mean weakness. Toler-

ance meant acceptance. She must keep clear of it all.

A harsh doctrine, harshly adhered to; but Mary was built of sterling metal, rigid and unyielding. She had the defects of her temperament. Her one desire was to free herself from this atmosphere of luxury and idleness: to free herself, and to go back to the working world—the working world where stern ideals reigned, uncompromising, with no half-way house of toleration opening enervating portals.

And yet Mrs. Ellestree had been kind. She spoke with sudden intensity.

"I must go. It's on business. It's a matter that must be dealt with. But—oh, won't you give up Mr. Cuvier? I have thought so much of you."

Give him up! Give up her most absorbing interest—the man whose slightest utterance was of moment, the giant who had strode into her life to hold it in eternal dominance! Give up Mr. Cuvier's fascinating companionship, the triumph of his subjection, the glory of his homage, because a callow fledgeling thought it dangerous! As if she, Susan Ellestree, could not control the dangerous element! She, with her knowledge of the world, her infinite wisdom, and so strong a will!

It was not a woman, drifting wilfully along the tide of passion, who looked at Mary. It was a woman who was certain of her strength, fully resolved to hold back from undue abandonment.

"You are being rather impertinent and extremely foolish," she said, quietly. "If you are determined on going, I think you had better go."

Mary complied with the request. Again her heart was burning with anger against these people who made her feel so small—and oh, so impotent!

She shut the door and stood against it for a moment. The land of promise had crashed into ruins, and she was left in a desolate Sahara. The

passage throbbed and danced before her, a sick revulsion against the whole household gripped her.

"The house of sin! The house of sin!" The letters seem to stare out of the shadows. In the hall below she could hear Rosalys' rich voice, lazily talking to an unseen audience. She stepped to the baluster and looked down.

Through the open door, green leaves waved: across the lawn the river sparkled, white in the blinding sunlight. Inside, all was cool and dreamful. On the divan Rosalys lay, her beautiful body thinly clad in a *négligée* of lawn and lace; the sleeves were open to her shoulders; her neck gleamed through the thin transparency; her hair hung down in ruddy waves.

The young actor lounged on the rug beside her, and in the window-seat sat Ferroll, bandying jest and laughter with them. The heat encircled them with happy languor.

The girl drew back with a shiver. They would have gone with Susan. They would have encouraged her. There was a lack of moral stamina in the whole atmosphere: and in it, Susan Ellestree had sunk till she reached the depths where she now lay, whence all her wisdom and dignity had fled.

Behind the white door, what anguish reigned! What anguish and abasement!

Mary gained her room with quick, short steps. Her box was packed and labelled. She would tell them to send up for it from the station, and keep it till she wired directions. She had packed immediate necessities in a bag, and, lifting it up, made her way down the back stairs. She could not bring herself to face the people in the hall. Her one thought was to get away.

The sun blazed down on the high-road and the bag was heavy, but her step had renewed life.

She had left the pleasure-garden.

Every minute took her further from it: every minute

brought her nearer to the place which only she could fill. The battle no longer terrified her—her soul leapt towards it. To be up and doing—clean, and brave, and strong—out in the glare of the highway, out of the heavy-scented garden where the flowers languished for their captor—man.

CHAPTER XIV

"My magistracy of myself is an indefeasible charge, and my decisions absolute for the time and case."

R. L. S., *Lay Morals*.

"YES, I have come back." This indisputable statement was called forth by Mr. Humphry's startled, yet reminiscent, stare. Amazement was not replaced but intensified by recognition. Mr. Humphry's nicely-tabulated mind preserved an impression of a badly-dressed and awkward clerk whose hands twitched nervously, and who looked hysterical and anæmic. This self-possessed, perfectly appointed young woman was a revelation.

He appreciated the poise she had acquired; appreciated also the daintiness of her equipment. She was attractive to look at, and yet gave him a pleasant sensation of business-like capability. He shook hands with her warmly.

"How much better you are looking!"

"Yes."

Mary seated herself at the table, pushed the papers away, and put her gloves upon it. Looking at her more closely, Mr. Humphry began to perceive a certain compressed resolution about the firm-lipped mouth which was not wholly pleasant. It puzzled him.

"I've just come from the works. I went there to see Sanders."

"Oh! Then you've heard the great news?"

"About the patent?"

"Yes. A marvellous invention, isn't it? It ought to revolutionise the tube trade. Of course we haven't got it yet."

"We shall never have it."

"Oh, come, come, come! This isn't like you, Miss van Heyten!"

Mr. Humphry leaned back in his chair with a touch of reproach. The young woman opposite looked up astonished.

"Not like me?"

"You were braver when I saw you last. Ah, you've been out of the shafts and it's naturally overwhelming when you first get back! But you mustn't give up hope. Sanders has not been content with obtaining the option—he went out to Dalmatia to get it, too, as I expect you've heard—but he's left no stone unturned to insure Cuvier's defeat. He tells me Cuvier's are getting very hard pressed. There is every possibility that they will not be able to meet their obligations, and as Sanders has induced Reich to give them no extension——"

"I know all this. Mr. Sanders was very explicit." The girl hesitated for a moment; something seemed to be preventing utterance.

"Do you know how Sanders obtained the knowledge of this patent?"

Her eyes suddenly lifted, confronting the hard-faced man of business.

"How? In the usual way!"

"Not in the usual way of Berryfield's!"

Over Mr. Humphry's visage an expression of frowning astonishment was spreading. Mary controlled herself.

"Sanders obtained the information about the patent through bribing a foreman at Cuvier's. The foreman was dismissed; but he has been helping Sanders; they have bribed other workmen there. That is

how they have learnt about the tests. Through bribery and corruption."

Mr. Humphry did not look pleasant.

"Sanders knows his business: he has had to employ whatever methods lay to hand. In the present state of trade it is essential that this patent does not slip out of our hands."

"Even if we stoop to thieving it?"

Mr. Humphry's thin lips narrowed. He cast a cold and crushing glance at his interlocutor. Mary's demeanour did not change. There she sat, a neat and youthful figure in her linen travelling suit, surmounted by a burnt-straw hat with its big black French bow. Her face was as colourless as usual, her manner as composed.

Mr. Humphry pushed his chair back a foot, his rubicund countenance aglow with something akin to indignation.

"That is an extraordinary remark to make to me."

"I don't think so. You know Mr. Berryfield left his business to me, because he trusted me to keep up to his standard. I think he must be turning in his grave to think that Berryfield's has sold its honour."

"You use strong words."

"What else is it?"

"Business is business."

"Cuvier's found this patent; Cuvier's have spent thousands testing it; we have not risked a penny except on the bribes we have given Cuvier's men to betray their master's secrets; and yet you would sanction stepping in and stealing the patent which Mr. Cuvier has tested."

"You do not seem to consider that we have been acting solely in your interests."

"My interests can only be served by upholding the honour of the firm. That is the trust that has been left to me."

Mr. Humphry took off his spectacles and polished

them with minute care. An intimate acquaintance of Mr. Humphry would have recognised this as betokening the deepest shade of annoyance.

"Women always take responsibilities too sentimentally. You talk about a 'trust' and 'honour'; well, of course that's all very pretty, but this is an age of competition. If Berryfield's is to prosper, Berryfield's must fight."

"But fairly!"

"Sanders has done nothing out of the ordinary. If you'll take my advice you'll leave things to him and me and go back to your aunt. Such things are not for women. You broke down before and you'll break down again."

Mary's face had not changed during the little homily, neither had her purpose.

"I am not going back. I am going to take this affair in hand."

Mr. Humphry's forehead was cleft by an ugly vertical line. Mary's voice had a ring of decision that did not meet his conception of the feminine temperament.

"Do you mean to say you have not sufficient confidence in my judgment?"

"It is not a question of personal sentiment. The responsibility for Berryfield's prestige is mine. I do not consider the course Sanders is taking will reflect to my credit. I therefore stop that course of action."

The square chin had not belied its owner. Deliberately the words came forth, clear and sharp as the ring of a bullet.

Mr. Humphry sat arrested, his amazed mouth opening and shutting impotently. Women, in Mr. Humphry's mind, were creatures to be petted, reasoned with, directed. Here was a slip of a girl, who had not only taken the reins but showed a bewilderingly unexpected power of grip.

"But as a business man——" Mary's clear eyes

disconcerted him. He puffed his chest out angrily. "You cannot presume to pit your inexperience against my knowledge."

"I don't pretend to any knowledge except the knowledge of Mr. Berryfield. He trusted to my judgment and left sole power to me. I must use that power."

"Of course you can do exactly as you like."

Mary bowed her head, accepting the smarting thrust in a composed and literal spirit.

"Yes. So I came down. I did not think you knew."

Mr. Humphry deepened into purple. Mary had spoken with perfect simplicity; she saw the rising colour and felt a rush of compunction.

"Oh, I know you thought it was all right. You didn't realise what the position was. I know you didn't, Mr. Humphry. It was only because you were watching my interests. You wouldn't have dreamt of taking an unfair advantage of any one for yourself. Please don't think I'm criticising you." She had melted. Glowing, warm-hearted, the woman showed herself. She was sorry for Mr. Humphry, genuinely sorry that he had blundered into so ignoble a position. "Please don't think I don't appreciate your kindness. I shall never forget your sympathy that dreadful Saturday when you told me of the will, only you must see I couldn't let this thing go on. Why, Cuvier's are despising us. Oh, Mr. Humphry, you wouldn't like your firm to be disrespected. You're proud of the way in which every one looks up to it, and trusts it. Can't you understand how I feel for Berryfield's?"

Mr. Humphry cleared his throat. He was a busy man, and had not paid much heed to anything but the material affairs of Berryfield's. Mary had put a new complexion on the matter. She saw his uncomfortable expression and hurried on.

"It's my fault to a great extent. The day that

Mr. Berryfield died Cuvier's sent some one down with letters they had found from Sanders. I promised he should be cautioned; probably dismissed. Directly the messenger had left the office we heard of Mr. Berryfield's death. Then I fell ill. When things did come back I was too tired to care. I have only just realised what the consequences may be."

"I see. I'm sorry. I'm a very busy man, and am afraid I left everything to Sanders. I naturally thought he had your entire trust. Now I understand. You wish to give up the option?"

"Sanders has forestalled that. He informs me he has taken the option in his own name and formed a syndicate to purchase it. He has always hated me. Since he heard about the disposition of the property, he has been striving to feather his own nest."

"*Sanders* is purchasing! But this is infamous! Nothing could have been clearer than the fact that Sanders signed on our behalf."

"I have seen the paper. It is assigned to him."

"The man's a common thief!"

"Exactly. I had the pleasure of telling him so. I also told him that if it took our last penny, Cuvier's should have that patent; and I want a statement as to how we stand with the bank. If Cuvier's is in difficulties through Sanders, we must accept the responsibility. If the worst comes to the worst, I must be in a position, at a moment's notice, to draw ten thousand pounds—you must see the bank—that is, I believe, the price that Mr. Cuvier must pay to complete purchase."

"I scarcely think that's *possible*. The business is already hampered by the suicidal policy Sanders has been adopting. To draw such a sum would involve you in considerable difficulties."

"I cannot help that."

Mr. Humphry shut up the knife that he was playing with: he was again losing his temper.

"A plain, straightforward statement must put things right. You've had nothing to do with the affair."

"If Sanders gets the patent it will not put the matter right."

"You've nothing to do with Sanders."

"He's acted in the name of Berryfield's."

"He's dismissed because of his behaviour. As long as you refuse to deal with him, no one can blame you: in fact most people would think your conduct quixotic——"

"In refusing to purchase stolen goods?"

Mr. Humphry cleared his throat: his temper would not long withstand the strain.

"It's a difficult situation. Still I'm sure Mr. Cuvier will appreciate——"

"He won't believe a word of it!"

"My dear Miss——"

"I know him. He'll never believe me. He despises women. If I tell him the truth about my illness and Sanders being left in charge, he'll only think me a fool if not a trickster, and as for admitting I could help him, he'd die first! Yet I am Berryfield's. Oh, for the honour of the firm we must stand right with this man! Mr. Berryfield would have lost everything he had, rather than feel he owed apology to Cuvier's."

"Mr. Berryfield's personal antipathies were foolishly pronounced."

"That isn't for me to judge. I must do what he'd do."

"I fail to see how he could remedy——"

"We must see that Cuvier gets the patent if we pay for it."

"Absurd!"

"Cuvier must have the patent."

"But do you imagine he'll take the money from you?"

"No."

"Then what on earth——"

"I must be prepared for any contingency. I am going to London now; I also have a . . . source of information about Mr. Cuvier's affairs. I think I can keep in touch. If the worst comes to the worst, I shall go to his office. Thank goodness he has no idea who I am: no one has up there."

"You're going back, then?"

"At once. I've left Raynor in charge at the works, he's very steady, if a little slow. I can trust him to look after things for a fortnight."

"You have dismissed Sanders?"

"Of course. I saw him off the place."

"You've got a nerve." He was forced to grant the tribute, unwilling though his admiration was.

Miss van Heyten glanced at him in rather pitiful surprise. She did not realise how young she looked. Responsibility had withered youth. She felt old—old as the dead Berryfield whose place she filled.

"Perhaps I was scarcely accurate in saying I dismissed him. On finding that there was no market for his thefts, Sanders did not evince a feverish anxiety to stay. I merely saw that he departed. I can rely on your seeing to that cheque? Of course, Cuvier's may raise the money. It's only that I want to be prepared for anything. I don't like the way in which Sanders looked and spoke. He was too certain."

Mary's eyes were dark with worry. She rose up, gazing straight in front of her. Mr. Humphry had been put out of the picture with unflattering completeness. He felt the unbecoming lack of feminine appeal. He stood by the door, holding it open with a not too pleasant expression on his face.

"I am only here to obey your instruction. I see you do not want my approval or advice."

"No." Mary put out her hand simply. "No one can help me. I don't quite see the way myself. I

only know one thing. Sanders is not going to get that patent."

Then Miss van Heyten passed out, leaving Mr. Humphrey with the knowledge that Miss van Heyten's business was Miss van Heyten's business only.

CHAPTER XV

"Where the apple reddens
Never pry:
Lest we lose our Edens."

BROWNING.

THERE is nothing more cheerless than a shut-up flat. Mrs. Ellestree was conscious of a sense of depression as she entered. There were no plants or flowers, and the muslin-covered furniture formed ugly, shapeless bundles. A white diaper covered the carpet, and the moonbeams lay in a cold pool of light upon it. Dust was thick on the mantelpiece and tables.

Cuvier experienced a similar irritation as he followed her. The little dinner had been so charming that both were still inclined to talk, but he had vaguely anticipated cosiness and comfort. The bare, deserted room killed sentiment.

Susan Ellestree had no consciousness of imprudence in inviting Cuvier to accompany her. She was careless of convention. Her only thought was one of annoyance at the forlorn aspect of her sitting-room. She threw off her wrap and looked round for a chair; her face bore a look of restless eagerness that was not wholly happy. It was as if Mrs. Ellestree were ranged against some hidden power, and was cognisant of defeat. The power was not Cuvier. She was accepting him in defiance of the secret restraint.

Cuvier was puzzled still. Though Mrs. Ellestree had hurried up to town obedient to his bidding, though she had sat through dinner, listening to his careless love-making and shining eyes and flushed

cheeks, to-night he did not feel that she would surrender. Something eluded him, something that cried out to the brute in him to capture.

Cuvier felt no reverence for the woman who responded to his sleepy dominance with such appreciation of his power, yet Mrs. Ellestree did not invite caresses. Her face was dimmed with trouble.

Cuvier's brows knitted. He respected being mistaken in his judgment, especially of a woman. To-night he was determined to test this woman's strength. That she loved him he was certain.

"I'm sorry the flat's so dirty. London is terrible after the country, isn't it? I can't even offer you a drink. I don't believe there's anything in the flat."

"It doesn't matter, thanks. I'm with you; that's the main thing!"

"You're very gallant!" Mrs. Ellestree spoke rather hurriedly. Her smile was constrained; and the worried look stayed in her eyes.

"You like honesty." Cuvier approached her and leant against the piano; his elbow smudged the dust.

"Oh, it's *so* dirty! Don't lean on it!"

Cuvier examined his coat indifferently, then looked down on her.

"May I come here?" He sat, turning side ways so that he could watch her closely. One hand went out and touched the fan she held.

"How much more time must we waste before I can tell you all the things I want to say?"

"You haven't wasted very much, have you?" Mrs. Ellestree spoke with humour. Cuvier lessened the distance between them; his hand grasped hers.

"When are you going to give in?"

He was surprised at the answer. Susan Ellestree caught her breath in a sigh that was almost a sob; her hand burnt in his. He felt her tremble. There is always a psychological moment when a man knows

he may kiss a woman. Cuvier's doubts departed. In another moment his arm encircled her.

"Answer."

"What is there to answer? You know I love you."

Susan's voice was shaking; she leant her face against Cuvier's shoulder with pathetic trust, and yet feverishly, as if she had determined to find harbourage, even though she doubted in her heart of hearts. He tightened his grip, till it seemed as if a steel band pressed round her.

Susan closed her eyes. Mary's words still floated in her memory, but she fought them down. She loved Cuvier as one loves the impossible heroes of one's girlhood. His imperturbable indifference, his keen brain, his brutally impersonal mastery subdued her fancy. She had longed to be roughly conquered, and this man had won her with his casual insolence. Yet while she joyed in his caresses, something tugged at conscience. Doubt hung nebulous in the background, doubt of his sincerity. Did he love her as she loved him? Was it serious to him. No word or act of his gave hope of this.

"What does your love mean?" Cuvier's voice came in a whisper.

She raised her beautiful face in passionate frankness. When a woman like Susan Ellestree loved, she used no weapons of dissimulation; she gave in in superb surrender. She could not lie even to save her pride.

"The usual meaning. I'm only happy when I'm with you. My life has only you in it."

Before Cuvier realised what she was doing, she released herself and stood with her back towards him, hiding her tears; then walked across the room, and stood fingering an ornament. Emotion shook her. She hated him to see her break down, hated the foolish tears, strove desperately for self-possession.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing." Mrs. Ellestree still kept her back

studiously towards him. "I was only thinking how strange things are. Here I've longed for love, longed to meet some one like you whom I could look up to and who was stronger than myself. You don't know how I've wanted some one in my life who could teach me and help me. Now you've come. I may be wrong, but you seem the person I've been longing for: You say you love me too. Well, it seems as though we might have been of such help to each other . . . and yet . . ." She shrugged her shoulders, her voice had broken dangerously.

"But we're going to be a great deal to each other."

"What?" Mrs. Ellestree turned, her eyes looking at him in contemptuous impatience of pretence. "We shall meet, drive home together, sometimes you'll call on me. We shall talk . . . about each other. We shall miss each other . . . and that's all. I can't share your home and work. I can't become part of your life. It's the every-day things that bind people together."

Cuvier was silent. He had not the faintest intention of taking Susan Ellestree into his home. He abhorred the idea of marriage. Marriage on top of a divorce would be unspeakable. Women were for relaxation outside his eyrie. The life of casual meeting that Susan had described fulfilled all his wishes.

"Oh don't let's bother about the future. Anything might happen. In the meantime, take things as they are and enjoy them. Don't waste time, for instance, now."

He held out his hand, speaking tenderly, but with a carelessness that the woman felt. She did not respond to the easy invitation this time. Instead, she sat down deliberately in the chair beside the window; her hands clasped the sides, judicially; her mien was hard.

"Do you think it's waste of time to stop and look where one's going, when one's walking to a precipice? We're not boy and girl. I know quite well where this may end. Perhaps men don't understand what a gulf lies between what you call a good woman and . . . well, never mind. Only if I give in to the joy of loving you, I can never go back. I want to see where I'm going."

"No one need know."

"I shall!" Mrs. Ellestree laughed a little. "Rosalys looks up to me. I'm kind to her. Now people will be kind to me, broad-minded people; the moral ones . . ."

"Moral people will never approve of you." Cuvier's disdain for Susan's judges robbed the comment of impertinence.

"It doesn't matter if they do or not while I know they're unjust. But if . . . if you and I . . . well, there are some people I couldn't see again." Mary's terror was fresh in Susan's mind.

"What if you don't see them? You'll have me. You'll make me angry with these . . . other people."

Cuvier rose and came slowly toward her.

"I'll make you forget."

"Oh, how much do you love me?" The eyes that met his were passionate in their despair. Cuvier dropped on one knee before the chair.

"I'll show you."

"N—no—no." Mrs. Ellestree drew back from his mastering hand. "We must talk things over sensibly, quite sensibly; you know, I've a husband who's not very fond of me, but he's jealous. If he found out, he'd divorce me without hesitating. I must face that. Then?"

"Don't analyse and worry. Don't you know men hate to think of the future? It will solve itself. I won't let you think. You shan't think. You shall

give me what I want." He was about to catch her in his arms; desire burnt in his eyes; the brutality in his face was terribly emphasised.

Mrs. Ellestree pushed back her chair with a suddenness that left him unprepared.

"I've spoken of my future. You don't think that's important. I've spoken of my self-respect. It's nothing to you if I lose it. You are asking for my soul to give you a little casual pleasure. Do you know, I don't think it's worth it!"

Some women look beautiful in rage; Susan Ellestree was one of them. As a goddess, risen from her throne, she stood defiant. Cuvier was dumbfounded. Was this the secret of the puzzle? Was Susan Ellestree a woman to be knelt to after all? Was her pride deeper than her vanity, stronger even than her love? For a moment the nobler part of the man felt contemptible. Then brutality sprang up within him. She defied him; put him on one side, held her pride around her and forbade his entrance, even though she yearned for him. Her pride against his determination!

Most men would have sought to wake her passion with protestations of their love, to have flooded reason with a tide of physical emotion. Cuvier deliberately laid aside his weapon of attraction. Susan's mind refused him victory; her reason must be fought with and subdued.

His mouth narrowed; he spoke with more than usual coolness.

"I'm not going to make promises. Marriage is out of the question."

"Then when you made love to me, you meant nothing?"

"I meant what I said. You attract me; not so much at this moment as you did before, but still considerably. If you knew in what a quandary I stand at present, you would appreciate what an im-

pression you've made for me to pay any attention to you. Women don't come far inside my life, as a rule: never, when it's as full as it is now with vital matters. That you are in it is extraordinary. But as to pretending you usurp my whole thoughts—even the greater part of them—that would be absurd."

"You are very truthful."

"That is another compliment."

A faint smile twisted Cuvier's lips. His imperturbability had a calming effect on Susan. She sat down with an attempt at equal self-control?"

"Then what are you offering me?"

He leant against the window, looking down on her with a smile which was cruel in its confidence of her surrender. He would make no terms. He knew the power he exercised.

"My love, such as it is. My undivided love. I should like to preserve its romance as long as possible. That is why I should advocate an *amitié amoureuse*, rather than the publicity of an open liaison, with possibly the after-dregs of a forced marriage. I may tell you, the mere idea of marriage is an abomination to me; always has been. Under the most favorable conditions, I should loathe any woman inflicted on me as a wife."

Mrs. Ellestree's breath came rather quickly. Her statuesque face was moved to unwonted feeling. Cuvier watched her with narrow eyes. He enjoyed her anger. He lowered his voice caressingly, watching her bosom heave, her colour flushing under the merciless battery.

"I thought you were above the usual conventions! I can offer you nothing except my love. If you were the ordinary domestic woman, I should not have shown my feeling for you. But I have thought of you as an equal. You are so strong, so philosophic. You would do what other women would not dare to do. I lay down my hand. Take it or leave it."

"For our pleasure. That's all it means. I'm a recreation for you, only that?"

Cuvier shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly, acquiescing in his silence.

"I would work for you, think with you, take care of you, live for you. And you only want my kisses."

"My dear woman, you have an idle life with nothing in it; I have a life devoted to a purpose. You must see we can't hold relatively the same places."

Mrs. Ellestree regarded the moonlight steadily. Cuvier moved nearer.

"Come, give yourself. You want to, and I want you. Our relations only concern ourselves; if we want each other, why deny our need? Come to me. Just come. This cursed intelligence and pride of yours stand in our way like sentinels. I can't love when I'm watched."

Suddenly his arms closed round her: his kisses burnt her lips, heavy, overmastering. She had only strength to turn her face away, burying it against the chairback in self-protection.

"Not love!"

The cry was breathed into the cushions. His hands were still upon her shoulders. She shuddered underneath his touch, wincing from him till his grasp gave way and she was free to realise—terribly to realise.

Flowers to be plucked, and then thrown away. She was worth more than that.

Even though her whole soul cried out to surrender, she would not, knowing what surrender meant. She called to the past to help her in the struggle between her womanhood and her soul. For she loved him, her being thrilled with fierce joy to hear the brutal words. Here was no slave pleading, promising, but a giant mastering her . . . No. Odd memories came to her. The quiet skies, the young girl kneeling by her in the shadowy room, while she had felt the youthful worship hushing her discontent to a divine

acceptance. She was good then: she was strong: she had the right to lean down from a golden throne, comforting and raising . . . And it was all only a battle to him! A conflict! His will against hers! That was the terrible part. He only wanted to win. Afterwards . . .

Reason conquered, even though desire flamed through her being. Her pride rose up, hard, protective. She had offered him her life's devotion, and he wanted little more from her than from a woman of the streets.

She raised her head; in that hour she had passed through the greatest bitterness life can hold for woman. Never again would Susan Ellestree feel confidence in her personality. Put to the crucial test her power had failed, ignobly, wholly. The man she loved had wanted her . . . and had appraised her at how slight a value.

The tears were still in her eyes, but her gaze was steady.

"We do not mean the same by love," she answered. "The love I have to give is not the love you want from me: I can't give you my kisses without giving you my soul. You would find that a nuisance . . . you think of me so meanly . . . I'm worth more than that . . . I'm longing to give you all, you don't know how I'm longing . . . but my pride keeps me, thank God! Thank God!"

She met his eyes, looking at her with an expression that almost held acquiescence. She turned away, sick with the hopeless pain of it. He cared . . . but he only cared so far . . . and nothing she could do would bring him an inch farther. She knew this. Yet she longed for him, longed pitifully, desperately, with a passion that had almost passed beyond control. Her pride, her reason, her every sane and healthy instinct cried out to her to send away this man who wanted her kisses, but not her companionship; who would give

her the material things which she might ask of him, but who would give her nothing of his soul or manhood. This man who deliberately proposed to take her as his mistress, and as deliberately refused her marriage.

Yet it was his strength, his absolute self-control, his wide ambitions that drew her out of her egotism and worldly wisdom, and thrilled her soul with devotion and respect. He was absolutely independent of her. He did not need her. He counted her a trivial issue in his life. How she worshipped his cold power!

Anguish racked her: she sat down helplessly, turning her face toward the cushions, too wretched to move or weep.

Cuvier watched the conflict dispassionately, yet with a cynical pity. At least, she was making a fight for it. Yet he knew the struggle was an unmatched one. He read the triumph of her body. There was no real revulsion of her soul. Her pride held her: but she had told him that it held her! How she had confessed!

Yet she had struggled! In some measure she had felt the indignity he offered. The knowledge of this softened his feeling toward her. He sat down by her quietly. For the moment desire had subsided. The pathos of her weakness struck on his perception.

"Yes, you are worth more than most women," he said, "I believe I ought to leave you."

He saw a shudder tremble through her body. He put his hand on hers lightly, holding it almost sadly.

"Only the worst of it is, you don't want me to leave you, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know!" The woman did not withdraw her hand from his. Her head was turned from him: her grasp tightened . . . feverishly. "I wish . . . I wish . . . you'd lied!"

"Ha!" Cuvier released his grip almost roughly,

then stood looking down on her. His mouth curled narrow as a whip-lash.

"You're all the same at heart," said he. "'Pon my soul, it's only a question of your pride, as you call it, the pride that wants to assume the virtue that you have not: and the cowardice that makes you afraid to face discovery. It isn't the kisses that repel you: it's the consequences. Oh you good women . . . you good women . . ."

He was going.

Susan Ellestree lifted her head: saw that he was going.

"Would you have had me come when you have set no value on me?"

"If I would have you, you would come," said Cuvier. His eyes met hers. She grew white as the foolish muslin cushions against which her shoulders rested.

"I would not . . . I would not."

"Wouldn't you? Very well then. Stay with your pride and see how that satisfies."

"You have not won."

"Won! If I wanted to win, do you think I shouldn't take you? No. I'm leaving you for the sake of . . . call it a sentiment . . . But if I want you, I know that I can have you. I've tested your morality."

"I would never come."

"Yes . . . if I needed you."

Cuvier's gaze met hers, almost with a smile. A smile that had the tenderness of a caress: that thrilled her and yet stung her to the quick.

The door closed behind him.

For some moments after he had left, the woman sat still listening breathlessly. Then as his foot-steps died away, a sudden revulsion seized her. Her eyes wandered round the room, sick at its desolation.

Why had she been so foolish? Why had she been so mad as to send him from her?

It was easy to be brave while he was there; it was not easy when she was left in blank despair. She had spoken truly when she had said life held nothing but him. What had she now? What prospect to look forward to?

To go back to Rosalys and the river where every ripple sang his name? To remember there how lightly he had left her, when business put forth a beckoning finger?

To go elsewhere, where he was not, where he had never been?

To stay in London alone in the cheerless flat, searching the pavements for a sight of his figure?

Heartburning and loneliness whichever way she turned, with only the consciousness of being stronger than the other women . . . who were happy.

Oh, she was helpless—helpless before this tide of anguish.

CHAPTER XVI

"Much is to learn, much to forget
Ere the time be come for taking you."

R. BROWNING.

THE public writing-room of a temperance hotel is not conducive to epistolary activity. It was exactly an hour since Mary had sat down before the fly-blown ink-bottle and weary-looking blotter; and her endeavours had produced nothing more than the filling of a waste-paper basket with scribbled half-sheets.

A very poor performance, and Miss van Heyten was conscious of the fact; yet how is one to frame a note to a chance acquaintance for no more apparent reason than a desire for his company.

Mr. Cobb had asked her to let him know when she was next in town, but Mary was uncomfortably certain that he would not expect a reminder two days after.

She pushed the blotter from her in disgust and sat looking out in miserable indecision. It had been easy to be resolute in Mr. Humphry's office; her relations with him were merely business ones.

But with Hayden Cobb . . . her heart beat with curious quickness at the recollection of his reserve. She would have given anything not to have made the first advance. It seemed so like an advance. To offer to come and see him? To ask him to come and see her? There were only two alternatives.

The clock upon the mantelpiece struck twelve.

Mary awoke to horrified perception that she had wasted the whole morning. She pulled the paper towards her in despair and scribbled a hasty line—

“DEAR MR. COBB,

“I am in London. If you have any time to spare this afternoon will you let me know?

“MARY VAN HEYTEN.”

She dispatched it by an express messenger—another sting. Berryfield’s was exacting many sacrifices.

Cobb’s answer was to the point and prompt. An hour after the dispatching of the missive, Mary, still in the forsaken lounge, was roused to crimson consciousness by his appearance.

“I was just going out to lunch when your note came, so it occurred to me there might be a chance of catching you. It’s so good of you to have remembered me.”

Good of her? A twinge of remorse pricked Miss van Heyten’s conscience. Cobb’s pleasure was evident.

“I thought perhaps you’d let me take you out to lunch. What about Gatti’s?”

“I don’t mind where.”

Mary caught at the proposition. It would be easier to lead up to her subject in the companionship engendered by a meal.

It was not so easy as she had imagined, however. When the first flush of pleasure at the meeting had subsided, Mary felt a restraint in Cobb’s manner. The shy glance she stole at him showed a face that was tense and haggard beneath the friendly mask. Though he had been most certainly glad to see her, his attention was not centered on their meeting.

As they sat down at the little table, with a strange sinking at her heart, Mary realised the difference

in his manner on the day when they had tea together. Then she was the sole object of his thoughts: now, he was as kind, but it was an effort.

She was so miserably conscious of the fact that she let the laboured conversation lapse and sat silent, her eyes upon the table-cloth, wishing with all her heart that she had not written to him. Cobb had not spoken for the last five minutes. His brow was furrowed, his whole bearing showed signs of an intense dejection.

"I'm so sorry!" Cobb's voice broke the silence suddenly. "What a rotten time I'm giving you! Do forgive me. Just for the moment I . . . I had forgotten you were here. The fact is, I had rather a knock-down blow this morning and it's left me kind of stupid. What were we talking about?"

"I don't know." Mary had lifted her eyes in acute realisation of the purport of his words. A knock-down blow! That might have reference to the patent!

Cobb was speaking hurriedly.

"I ought not to have told you. It was pretty weak of me to worry you with my affairs. Well let's forget it. Tell me what you've been doing with yourself. D'you know I came down to your place two nights ago. I was only there a few minutes or I should have hunted you out. It seemed an awfully pretty house."

The conversation was going away from the all-important subject. Mary launched her contribution desperately.

"I knew you had come for Mr. Cuvier; had the bad news anything to do with that?"

"We're not going to let the bad news trouble us." Cobb smiled across at her very creditably. The old look was returning to his eyes. "What were you doing that night?"

"I don't know. What does it matter? That is, I

was sitting in the boat-house. I heard something you were saying . . . about a patent . . .”

Mary's gaze turned desperately on Cobb; her lips were white.

“You heard us!”

Another expression had glanced across his face; one that went as quickly as it came, yet one which Mary recognised. So had he looked that grey March afternoon when he had lain Sanders' letters on the table—and watched her.

“A word or two.” She could say nothing more; the humiliation of his suspicion was too much to bear.

The young man may have seen this; his face took on a queer grave look, and his voice softened as if he were speaking to a child.

“About your old firm? I'm sorry that you heard me. I would have liked you to have known nothing about it. Well, it's true they have been playing us fairly shabby tricks, and I believe they've just attempted a shabbier one than they have yet accomplished, one which, unfortunately, seems as if it will come off. But that has nothing to do with us. We began our acquaintance . . .”

“At Berryfield's!”

“No, we didn't. We began it when I found you in Piccadilly. That's where we start from; and that's where I want to go on from. I don't mean business to come into this.”

“But you said yourself we're both business people. It seems only natural we should talk to each other about . . .”

“Each other's firms? No. That's just what we're not going to do. You naturally feel loyalty to Berryfield's; and I stand for Cuvier's. I'm not going to discuss anything about those firms' relationships. You've left Berryfield's, and business.”

“If we are friends, we trust each other, don't we?”

"Of course!"

The smile that was bestowed upon her was reassuring.

"Then why can't we . . . talk about business?"

"Because when a man likes a girl he doesn't want to talk shop to her."

"Suppose she wants to talk shop to him?"

"He won't let her."

The smile was deepening.

"Not even if . . . if he were in some big trouble?"

Mary's voice quivered; she raised her eyes in dumb entreaty. He must tell her.

Not being versed in mental telepathy, Hayden Cobb only saw the passionately pleading look. He was not more conceited than the ordinary run of men; but the most modest of individuals could not have failed to have perceived a more than usual interest in Mary's manner. We have said that Hayden Cobb's life had not been rich in human ties; this freedom from emotionalism had left his nature very simple.

He admired and liked this proud and reserved girl; her sudden show of feeling touched him. He was not only flattered by it; he felt gratitude, a queer unaccountable gratitude which made it, for the moment, difficult to speak. One of the greatest troubles of his life had come to him, he was still aching with the pain of it. He did not mind Mary knowing. He had felt sympathy with her the moment he had seen her. They looked at things in the same way; understood each other. For the first time in his life Hayden Cobb longed for human companionship. He never talked of his affairs, because it never dawned on him that people could be interested. But Mary was. She cared.

And he had rebuffed her stupidly, insensately! She was right. If they were to be friends, they must share each other's confidence.

He had no way of repaying her than by telling her. No harm could come to Cuvier's now, if all the world knew. So simply and honestly he laid down his secret.

"There's nothing much to tell you. Only we hoped for great things from a patent; and the last test has failed."

"Failed!"

It was so new a development that Mary could only sit still, speechless.

Hayden Cobb saw her bewilderment; he smiled a little unsteadily. Of course she could not understand the magnitude of the disappointment. He had been foolish to confide at all, as he could give but a half-confidence. The secret of the failure of the test might be public property; but the secret of Cuvier's liabilities, of the vast sums thrown away on the tests which had ended so disastrously, could be told to no one.

He tried to infuse more cheerfulness into his tone.

"Yes. It doesn't sound much, does it? Still it has hit us pretty hard. We've been foolishly optimistic I suppose; we had staked a good deal, and were so certain. The money was waiting in the bank to purchase. It seemed in our hand."

"It's ghastly . . . ghastly . . ."

Mary's cheeks were blanched; then an overwhelming tide of pity rushed across her. She could understand all that it meant! To see monopoly in one's reach, and find the diamond a worthless stone. She stretched her hand out with a quick impulse; the boy's grasp met hers.

"I'm sorry. I do understand. Oh, I'm so sorry . . . for you. Just you!"

Only the woman spoke; woman and comrade both: comrade who had felt the frenzied struggle, and knew the joy of triumph and the anguish of defeat. Frankly and tenderly, her heart went out to him in divine

compassion that, because she was a woman, longed to comfort with her actual touch.

The barriers were breaking fast; this was only the third time these young people had seen each other, and yet they turned to one another as naturally as a flower to the sun, as willows to the river, as children to a mother—great Mother Nature who had made them strong and self-reliant, and sent that divine unrest through their bodies.

Gatti's is not an ideal place for sentiment. Mary withdrew her hand as quickly as she had outstretched it; she could not withdraw the action however; nor, I doubt would she have done so had it been possible. The thanks in the boy's eyes had awakened the self in her which had worshipped Susan Ellestree. Half child, half mother, she looked up to Cobb, and yet yearned to take care of him.

"That's good of you. It's funny, but it helps. I didn't think anything could have helped."

"Just my being sorry?"

"It's a pretty big thing to me. D'you know, I don't believe I've anybody in the world to feel sorry about anything that happens to me. Not that I want any one, but it's odd, when one comes to think of it."

"Haven't you any people?"

"No. I was brought up by my mother's sister. My mother died when I was little, my father too, which is why I'm at Cuvier's. He'd always meant me to be in the Service, in his regiment he hoped. But when he died . . . well, there was no one to care about what happened to me; and as he hadn't left enough for Sandhurst, and . . . I say, does this bore you?"

"Bore me? No; please tell me."

"I'd like to." Cobb spoke simply. "Because you must think me awfully rude sometimes. I don't mean to shut up, but I can't help it. I've never been used to talking to people. My father died when I

was twelve; we had been great chums. I wonder if you've ever heard of him—Major Cobb? He died in action—some day I'll tell you. He got the V. C. for it; they sent it to me."

"And hadn't you any one?"

"This aunt. I didn't like her." A hard look came into his face. "She was very keen on things I thought rotten; money, and so on. And she was always complaining of how much I cost her. So I ran away from school—I was at Winchester—and became a clerk at Cuvier's."

"Clerk!"

"It was the only thing that I could think of. You see, I wanted to earn money so that I could pay back every shilling she'd spent on me; that was why I stood it for two years without her finding me. I had to live on fifteen shillings a week at first. It was a bit of a struggle till I began to be useful and Mr. Cuvier noticed me; and one night he met my aunt at dinner and happened—Heaven knows why or how—to speak of me. Then it all came out. He didn't go back on me. He . . . took my side. He offered to send me to Sandhurst, but I was too old, and I'd forgotten all the school part. Then he wanted me to go to Oxford, but I wouldn't. I preferred to stop with him. And since then he's been more decent than I can describe. You see now why I hate Berryfield's or any one who has injured him. I say, I *have* talked."

He bit his lips, half ashamed, half helpless.

The tears were shining in Mary's eyes. She was thinking of another life; Ferroll who cried and snatched; this man had suffered, and endured.

"Oh, I say, you mustn't. How rotten of me! I've done nothing but depress you since I came."

"No, you haven't." Mary forced a smile.

"Haven't I? I can't tell you what you've meant to me. Nothing matters so much now. I say, that's

pretty caddish of me. Yes, it does matter. Anything that touches Mr. Cuvier matters."

"I know it does!"

Generously the words flashed back to him. The boy coloured; her appreciation was so patent.

"Look here. I told you all that so that you could understand why I'm a bit old-fashioned. You see I think about my father a good deal. Not having had much chance of making friends, he's seemed to stay with me; and he loved old-fashioned women. When I met you I . . . I wondered what he'd think. That's why I was so glad when you said you'd given up business and gone to stay with your aunt. That's why I hate discussing business with you. My father loved women to be women."

Mary had risen; she stood with one hand on the table, leaning on it. Her eyes were desperate.

"You're under a wrong impression; I've not given up business; I shall always work."

"Not if some one worked for you, and there was no need?"

Cobb had risen too.

Mary's eyes met his straightly; in his was an overwhelming tenderness; in hers, unalterable renunciation.

"Always," she repeated. "All my life. I've undertaken something."

"But . . . but you'd give it up?"

Mary straightened herself; her voice was steady.

"If you had undertaken a responsibility for Mr. Cuvier, would you let anything stop you from fulfilling it, even if you cared for some one? Even if . . . you knew that person could never care for you if you fulfilled that trust?"

"Men are different from women!"

A flash of something mastering, almost of brutality, had come into the man's eyes. There are moments when all men are primitive.

Her male ancestors had left a heritage with Mary also. The light that shone in her eyes was as fierce as in his own.

"They share a sense of honour."

"Not the same sense."

It was the simplest repartee, born of sheer anger at the indomitable spirit which refused to yield; yet its effect was startling.

"You will see."

With uplifted chin the girl had turned from him. She was going.

"But you mustn't go like that. Here, never mind the change!" He had tossed a sovereign to the astonished waiter and was following at her heels. "Don't be so silly. I was only chaffing you. At least, half-chaffing. We can't quarrel now! I'm not going to have you quarrel."

Hayden Cobb occasionally bore a strong resemblance to his father. With shoulders back, head erect, and eyes confronting her, he barred the roadway.

"Let me go."

"Not till you've made friends. Why, it's absurd. What are we quarrelling about?"

"You said I was dishonourable."

"How perfectly ridiculous! You know I said nothing of the sort. Stop, cabby!" A hansom loitering by, stopped at the kerbway.

"We can't talk here. Come, jump in. Don't make a scene. You'll have to go home somehow. I swear I'll get out at Chancery Lane. I shall have to, as a matter of fact."

Cobb's hand grasped her elbow. Mary found herself put into the hansom without a chance of escape.

"Now then!"

The door was shut. His hand had closed on hers.

Mary controlled herself with a big effort.

"I can't alter myself. I've had to earn my living and I'm glad of it. I believe in work."

"There are all kinds of work."

"I believe in work that teaches courage, self-reliance, independence, then."

The rebel was not tamed. Perhaps that was why it was necessary for Cobb to tighten his hold of the rebel's hand.

"I believe in everything that has made you what you are."

"But not in my capability to talk of business."

"Oh, bother business! Why don't you let me forget it? I was beginning to."

The boy's face hardened. Suddenly a thought sprang into the girl's mind.

What . . . what if . . . Sanders had tampered with the final test?

She spoke quickly.

"You say that Mr. Cuvier could have found the money for the patent if the test had been successful."

"Of course . . . but . . ."

"It is!"

She was breathless. Instinct had told her. She knew as certainly as she sat there, that Sanders would close with the inventor on the morrow.

"Is what? Oh, do leave this wretched subject."

"But I've an idea, I might be able to help you. Sanders has queered that test!"

"Do you think I'd take help from you? Even if you could give it?"

The boy's grasp had relaxed. Mary's breath came shortly.

"Not take help."

"Listen, I know you mean well, but you must understand that men can't stand women mixing up in their affairs, you jump to a wild conclusion for which you've no proof . . . have you?"

"No. But I feel it. Sanders is a rogue."

"Please don't. It's no good, really."

"No!" Mary's voice had an odd inflection. She withdrew her hand. "Here's Chancery Lane."

Cobb put his hand through the door in acquiescence; then took hers and held it an instant.

"Something seems to have happened that's made everything unsettled and unsatisfactory. May I write?"

"It's no use."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. It's no use. I haven't the time to think about you. Go on, cabby."

Hayden Cobb stood on the pavement and watched the hansom driving down the Strand; he felt the same stupefied sensation he had experienced when he had heard of the failure of the patent.

CHAPTER XVII

“Oh, this love, this love,
Of this love I'm weary!”
JESS MACFARLANE.

LOVE is a ravaging flame when it meets the tinder of idleness. In the short time since Mrs. Ellestree had come up to town its marks had shown. She had remained at the flat. Restlessness consumed her, a devouring, miserable fever, fretting the more because of the hopelessness which engulfed her.

Cuvier had not been near since the night on which they had dined together. He had said he should be busy. Susan made excuses to herself, but with a sinking heart. She knew well enough that men find time to see the women whom they love.

Nothing is more terrible than the ease with which man courts any pretty woman chance throws across his path, unless it be the ease with which he puts her from his life again. Now business had rushed in with its insisting cares, and the idle hours of passion were no more. Fiercely, strenuously, Cuvier was battling in the conflict; and if Susan's memory came to him, it was only as the confused sense of distant presences which the hero of a street-fight feels. She was there, but in the background. If victory came his way, he might have leisure to again pursue her. At the present moment far more important calculations held him.

Susan had nothing to claim a single moment of her interest. Even Mary was gone. When Rosalys

Benton swept into the flat next day a cry of distress escaped her.

"Susan! How ill you look!"

"Do I, dear? What brings you up here?"

Susan stretched out a welcoming hand from the sofa where she sat.

"My darling Sue, what's happened? Something has. I see it. Oh, my dear, do tell me!"

Mrs. Ellestree felt two warm arms encircle her in a very wealth of bounteous affection; with a sudden sense of comfort she yielded to Rosalys' caress.

"You are a dear thing, Rosalys. It's a comfort to know there are some people in the world who feel."

"It's this horrid flat! It's enough to make any one feel hipped. I'm not going to leave you another single minute. I've had to rush up for rehearsals. I'm at the 'Cecil' for two nights and you'll just pack your bag and come across with me."

"You haven't asked what's the matter."

"Oh, my dear, it's always the same matter. Beasts. I could kill men sometimes. All of them. Why couldn't God have invented a race that would give less trouble, while He was about it? There, don't you dare to cry. And don't tell me a single word if you don't want to, but if you do, why, I'm here and perfectly crazy to know all about it"; and Rosalys bestowed another kiss upon her friend, and sank on to the hearth-rug in a whirl of white muslin.

Mrs. Ellestree looked down on the beautiful face, lit now with a sympathy divine in its absolute charity, and realised what a comfortable friend Rosalys was.

"There are lots of things, dear; some too terrible and too intimate to talk about even to you. But the worst has come this morning. Tom's written to say he's accepted a permanent post in America, and I'm to go straight out to him."

"To live there?"

"Five years at least."

"Oh, but, Sue, you couldn't. Why, what shall we do without you? We couldn't exist."

"Oh, you'll do very well. You have London, and your work, and everybody. But I! At this moment, I feel I can't. I simply can't."

Her self-repression was overcome. She rose hysterically. Rosalys slipped to a kneeling position, looking up at her.

"But why not? You've always wanted to go. You'll love it when you're once out there."

"No—no—no! I shan't know a soul, not that there's any one I'd want to know. I couldn't live out of England. One might as well be dead."

Mrs. Ellestree walked up and down the room. Her trailing gown swung tempestuously over the carpet. Her bosom swelled with emotion. Outside the window the rain splashed in warm showers; a gust of wind drove it in upon her passionate face. She turned with unwonted irritation.

Rosalys, wide-eyed and moved, gazed at her tragically.

"What shall you do?"

"I don't know. It's wicked to bring girls into the world and leave them penniless. I haven't a single penny of my own, and if I refuse to go with Tom he's quite capable of refusing an allowance. And I can't work. I'm tied to him as much as his dog is. Worse; a dog can generally find another home, but I . . ."

"My dear, you can always have a home with me."

"You're a wonderful friend, Rosalys. But I couldn't live permanently on your kindness. It would be an impossible position. No. There's another alternative. Perhaps you've guessed."

"Mr. Cuvier?"

"Yes."

Rosalys pursed her lips; she accepted the situation

with a matter-of-factness which showed it was not novel to her comprehension, but she looked uneasy.

"I should think it well over, Sue. If you were in the profession it would be different; people accept you there. But outside . . . well, people aren't so tolerant. You see you've *nothing*, dear. No money, nor a title, nor position, nothing to climb back by, if you go altogether. Of course I don't mind, but other people may be horrid."

"I shan't trouble my friends . . . after . . ."

"But you'll miss them. Oh, believe me, you'll miss them! Think, dear. You've liked being looked up to. You're not Bohemian by nature. You'd feel the shame so much more than . . . than people like myself would. And even I . . . well, I don't mind telling you I've had some bitter moments, so bitter that I've sometimes wondered if my freedom has been worth it. It's funny to hear me preaching, isn't it? I shouldn't if it were another sort of woman. But for you . . ."

"I must live! You earn your living by your personal magnetism. I earn mine in the same way. You can dress up woman as an ideal, but she's only something for man's pleasure. If she's on the stage she gets her fair price for charming him; if she's a wife she must trot at his heels, and take what he likes to give her."

"That's ridiculous. All women don't marry for a home."

"No. They marry for the same reason that I shall . . . go to Simeon Cuvier. I can't live without him . . . I can't . . . I can't."

For years Susan Ellestree had built up a citadel of self-control; passion had sapped its foundations. At the moment of her life when she most needed its entrenchments, it had failed her. The ramparts carried, the citadel collapsed into unsightly ruin. A month ago, it would have been impossible for Susan

to have spoken of her deepest feelings to any living soul; but now reserve had gone with self-control. The woman who had been a sheltering tower for those around her, stood helpless in the fire of her desire.

"Oh, my dear! My dear!"

The histrionic temperament is quick to realise the full significance of emotion. The cry had come from a breaking heart, and Rosalys appreciated the force that had inspired it. This was no evanescent love, no desire born of ennui or propinquity; the whole soul of the woman hungered for its mate.

And the man was Simeon Cuvier. There lay the tragedy.

"Well, have you nothing to say? I suppose you think me a fool."

"Oh, my dear, no . . . but . . . Simeon Cuvier."

Rosalys' voice died down again; she sat on the sofa looking at Susan, her eyes big with uneasy caution.

"Why not Simeon Cuvier? He's strong enough to take care of me." In spite of herself, the last words came lingeringly. "And he doesn't care about ordinary conventions. He's too great. That's what drew us together; he's so magnificently self-contained. Rosalys, he's the ideal I've always dreamed of. It's too wonderful to think I've met him. Oh, I should be mad if I didn't go. Do you remember what I said once? The cup is always held to us. There may be a sting lurking at the bottom of the draught, but I'd rather drink and be scorched than die of thirst. At least, I shall have had a flash of rapture. Oh, I want it so! I want it so!"

"If it only wasn't Simeon Cuvier!"

"It wouldn't have been any one. He's a brute. I know it! He doesn't attempt to hide it! I know exactly how he feels to me. I attract him, interest him, rest him. He wouldn't sacrifice one of his

ambitions to me, but he wants me! I . . . only I . . . can satisfy his need of me. Oh, Rosalys . . . it's so wonderful to feel he needs me!"

"But does he?"

Rosalys knew more than Susan did of Cuvier's life. She hated to chill Susan's joy, give pain, and seem unsympathetic, and yet she could not resist a note of warning even though she felt its uselessness.

"What do you mean by that?"

Mrs. Ellestree faced round with haughty aloofness. Rosalys stuck to her guns, albeit with a sinking of her heart which told her any effort would be wasted.

"I mean . . . his cruelty to women. He has no pity, Susan, when he is tired."

"I never supposed he's any better than most men," Susan spoke hardly.

"No. No. It isn't that. Heaven knows I don't expect men to be old women. If Cuvier only fooled about with chorus-girls, I shouldn't say a word. That would be no reason why he shouldn't love and appreciate you all the more. But . . . he isn't human in the way he treats them. I told you once I knew Carrie Ray's story. She met him when she first came out, and she was an honest, simple little thing. Her people were quite nice. So was she . . . till she met Cuvier. She fully thought he'd marry her. There was no reason why he shouldn't have done. Then . . . well . . . the usual thing happened."

"She must have been willing. He isn't a cad. He doesn't lie to women . . . nor use force."

"Perhaps she thought his love was worth it . . . but . . . wait, Susan. After she had loved him for a month—all told—he stopped coming. She wrote. She got no answer. She called at his office. He wouldn't see her, but that night he sent his secretary—a boy of twenty—to make arrangements! So much a year or so much down on condition that she

never troubled him again. And she had been a good girl, she was nineteen, and she adored him. Susan, if he sent a boy of twenty to see you!"

"You're a fool . . . a fool . . ." Susan's voice sounded a long way off; for a moment the story had left her stunned and broken.

"There must have been some reason . . ."

"She asked him that; she humbled herself to do that, poor little thing. She wrote. She got an answer from his secretary. It said that Mr. Cuvier had pressing business affairs and had no time for amusement. As his preoccupation would last indefinitely, he thought it fair to Miss Ray to bring their relationship to a definite conclusion. It ended with an announcement that all communications would be opened and answered by the secretary only."

Rosalys paused. Mrs. Ellestree had her back turned.

"I've seen the letter . . . She showed it to me . . . We happened to be in the same company once, and I didn't dislike her. I was so sorry for her . . . when I heard her story I understood. She's only twenty-three now. Just think. Susan . . . won't you consider . . .?"

"No!"

With a flash, Mrs. Ellestree had turned.

"No! Your story doesn't bear on my case! Carrie Ray! Good Heavens, to compare us! Carrie Ray! The by-word of two continents. What Mr. Cuvier felt for her couldn't resemble what he feels for me. He respects me. You chose a bad example. His conduct was quite right and wise. Those women have to be shaken off."

"She wasn't one of those women then. She was a good girl, whose innocence and freshness were real. I don't pretend to shield her now. But Cuvier brought her world crashing round her ears and she went mad. She drinks: she drugs: she spends her

life in snatching after fresh sensation; but her heart's broken, and any day I shouldn't be surprised to hear she'd put an end to herself. He took that girl, used her for a moment's recreation, and tossed her off as he'd throw away his cigarette-ash."

"I'm glad. I hate her! I hate every woman he has known! They've had him in those years when I didn't know him."

"You're mad! You're not a girl; you know that passion isn't everything."

"It is when you've never had it. I've longed to feel what I feel now. It's tearing me to shreds. It's broken all my cultivated virtues. It's throwing me at his feet—on his mercy, and I know he has no mercy—but I can't help myself!"

"But try . . . try to control . . ."

"I have! I sent him away. I don't know how I did it, but I sent him from this very room the night I came up . . . two nights ago . . . was it only that? Rosalys, it's been years since!"

Susan held out her hand with a piteous cry. Rosalys knelt beside her, her great arms round her, mothering her.

"Poor Sue! Poor Sue! Oh, why did God make us to suffer so?"

"I don't know. All my life seems to have been a mockery. It's supposed to be a good thing, isn't it, to live for other people? Well, I've done that all my life. I've only lived for Ferroll and for Tom. It's brought no happiness. It's brought me nothing, not even the strength to combat this unholy love. It is unholy. I know it! I know it! He has decreed it. He doesn't want the highest love, the wife-love, the love I could give him. But whatever he wants, I want to give him. And in giving, I shall have joy. The joy I've hungered for, but never even hoped for . . . the joy that is my right from life. Think how I have suffered, I, who could have been so

happy! I have lived in the midst of shut doors; now I'm desperate. I'll burst this one open . . . and die . . . when the . . . secretary comes . . . to make arrangements. But I shall have wrested joy from the starved potentialities that crowd round me; I shall have broken through them! After . . . what matters? It is simply the end."

"Will you be satisfied with what he has to give? If he loved you . . ."

"He does! He does! As much as he *can* love . . . he has said it!"

"He loved Carrie Ray; she was never happy. She always felt the wall."

"Why do you keep dragging in that woman's name?"

"Because my heart bled for her! Oh, I know you think me an easily-touched person. So I am. But that woman's wretchedness appalled me. She was seared, so seared that it made me sick to realise what she had suffered."

"And yet you asked Cuvier to dinner. You asked him down to stay with you."

"I know. I told you I knew he was a brute . . . yet . . . Well, one doesn't think. He attracts and interests, and there's the spice of deviltry that makes one challenge such people and . . . and . . ."

"And so you let him stay . . . to make me love him. You did it, Rosalys."

"Good Heavens, don't I know it? Isn't that why I'm talking so? I feel it's my fault. I was so lost in my own happiness, I didn't trouble to watch where any one was going. And now my happiness is come I'm terrified lest I shall lose it as a judgment for having been so reckless and so selfish. That's why I've preached! That's why I haven't sympathised. I should have done so once upon a time. Only my joy has changed me, sobered me, it's made me feel responsible. Oh, Susan, I couldn't bear to feel

I'd any hand in making you look as Carrie Ray looks."

"You needn't take responsibility. The Power that made us as we are, with desires and passions, is the only Power to be thanked or blamed. That, and ourselves. You were only one of the outside circumstances. Don't look so tragic. Nothing has happened yet! Nothing may ever happen. At present I have sent him away! I assure you, he won't come back. He's much too busy!"

There was a bitter sting in the laughter. Rosalys might not have wisdom, but she was full of that most useful commodity of intercourse—tact. She slipped her arm through Mrs. Ellestree's and stood beside her.

"Well, my dear, whatever you do, always count on me," she said with perfect simplicity. "Now will it bore you to see a great deal of Dick these next two or three days? Because, to tell you the truth, I'm up for something besides rehearsals; and I simply must have a woman to go round with me and choose frocks."

"Rosalys! You've something to tell me."

Rosalys, half tears, half smiles, hid her head on Susan's shoulder.

"I'm going to be married," said she. "In three weeks. He's to be in the same company. Herbert's engaged us both. Isn't it glorious? He's two years younger than I am, but he says it doesn't matter, and oh, Susan, I will be a good wife to him."

"Oh, my dear, I'm so glad," said Susan Ellestree. A foolish choky feeling came in her throat too. This magnificent Rosalys, with her wild bursts of generosity, her staunch heart, her unfailing forgiveness for every peccadillo under the sun, more, her ready sympathy for every one who sinned and suffered, was very dear to Susan Ellestree. Mary had only judged from theory. Susan knew.

Rosalys was the first to throw back her head and laugh the tears away; emotions chased one another very quickly, good-hearted, all of them.

"Aren't we idiots? Who would think us two women of the world? she said with a catch in her throat. "And, my dear, I'm due at Paquin's. Now tell your maid to pack a bag and send it to the 'Cecil.' Any old gown. Every one's away. Dick's coming in to-night. We've a box for 'The American Belle.' He'll love to have you with us. Dick's awfully fond of you."

Mrs. Ellestree kissed Rosalys, she could not speak. When the joy of one's life has gone from it, love of any kind is to be accepted humbly.

Rosalys followed her into her bedroom. Mrs. Ellestree put on a rose-garlanded hat, powdered her nose, and felt a little of life's happiness returning to her. Then with Rosalys' arm safely tucked in hers, she went down-stairs.

Late that evening they sat out in the courtyard, watching the hansoms drive up and discharge their sumptuous loads. A bevy of American chorus girls arrived, with their attendant admirers. Foreigners strolled up and lounged in the basket-chairs. A cosmopolitan babel filled the air, while the strains of the orchestra floated out from the restaurant.

Rosalys, superb in happiness and shimmering clouds of golden tissue, radiated light; by her side the young actor leaned adoringly. They talked well; Rosalys' clear voice bubbled with laughter as she flashed her careless comments on the play and people. And both she and her lover turned to Susan, including her in their love, warming her with their sympathy and homage.

Rosalys was no mean retailer of friendship. Even into the closest circle of her heart's romance, her friends should come. Lavishly she gave, and Susan lonely, desolate, accepted gratefully.

Yet as she gained her room and locked the door behind her, the path of renunciation seemed more chill than before. Morality was cold . . . cold as death. London, this London of the flaming restaurants and moonlit nights, spelt Life . . . and Love.

CHAPTER XVIII

"My Queen shall have high observance."

R. BROWNING.

"MISS VAN HEYTEN!"

Cuvier's tone was unflatteringly astonished. No man enjoys the invasion of women in office hours, and a visit from Mrs. Ellestree herself would have savoured of intrusion. Mary, pale and nervous, was a positive impertinence, and Cuvier did not trouble to disguise his feeling.

The strain of the last hours had wrought his nerves to breaking point. He had aged perceptibly. The lines on his face had started into prominence, the skin was drawn and sallow, only his eyes burnt from underneath the straight brows.

Mary advanced into his room. Since her interview with Cobb she had spent her waking hours in a torturing agony of fear and impotence. Every moment certainly became intenser as to Sanders' complicity.

She had puzzled over his leering confidence; she had known he possessed further knowledge than he had confided to her. This was his secret, then! At the last moment one of his spies in Cuvier's employ had tampered with the final test.

Cuvier would withdraw from completion of his bargain, leaving it in Sanders' hands.

She had no proof, but she knew it as surely as she knew she was the head of Berryfield's!

But what was she to do? Inform Cobb? He would laugh at her suspicion. That avenue of help was hopeless. Inform Cuvier? Would he believe her? Or would he look upon her information as another "move"—an impudently feeble one—on the part of Berryfield's. If she told him of her position . . . would that help?

Over and over she turned the tangled problem till her brain reeled in exhaustion. She passed a night of sleepless indecision, then when the morning sunlight dawned resolved to beard the lion. She must give Cuvier the chance of closing. At six his option lapsed.

So three o'clock found her at Cuvier's office. She had followed the office-boy, who took her card, and pushed past that amazed young gentleman upon the threshold of Mr. Cuvier's sanctum.

"You've come at a most inconvenient time. Mrs. Ellestree ought to have known better than to have sent you to my office."

Irritation rang through the words. Mary felt a sensation akin to fear. Instinct told her Cuvier was going to be "difficult."

She refuted his suggestion, however; she was enwrapped in the importance of her visit.

"It's nothing to do with her. I've left her."

"Left her?" Cuvier was roused to momentary interest. "Why?"

Mary's conscience pricked her as she thought of the way in which she and Mrs. Ellestree had parted; her mein softened.

"I had to go back to business."

Cuvier beheld her agitation and moved involuntarily. It infuriated him—these women with their emotionalism, their insistent call for sympathy and

sentiment! There was no place for them on the battleground where man must fight his fellows—still less a place in his office in these desperate moments. He pulled himself together with cold resolution. This girl was no concern of his. That she had left Susan Ellestree did not surprise him after seeing her isolation in that passion-scented atmosphere; but he could not undertake to help her. She must fight her own way.

"I'm sorry I haven't the time to listen." He spoke brutally, chafing to be free of her appealing presence.

"I won't keep you a minute, only you—you must hear. It's a question of such urgency. You don't think I should have come here idly? You don't think I should have come, if it had been possible to achieve my purpose in any other way? But there was no other."

Hesitancy had vanished. There are moments when the force of personality strikes through, overpowering and controlling. Something strong and penetrating rushed forth from Mary's soul, compelling respect. She was no longer a weak intruder pestering him with supplication, but some one with a right to speak. With desperation had come self-reliance.

"You must forgive me; I'm very worried just now. Come, what's the matter? I can give you five minutes. Now, you're a business girl I know, so I'll trust you to get through with it in that time. By the bye, is Mrs. Ellestree aware you've come?"

"No. She doesn't know where I am. She mustn't know."

"But you're not alone in London?"

"Yes."

"Any friends here?"

"No."

"Then where are you staying?"

"At the Thackeray Hotel, until . . ."

"You mean to say you walked out of the house without knowing a single soul to come to except myself?"

"I've come to your office, not to you. I don't think you know I've been at Berryfield's."

"Berryfield's?"

Cuvier's keen eyes were fixed upon the girl. His mouth settled into a sardonic line. Beyond that his expression showed no change. The girl was going to tell him of some trivial matter, foolishly unimportant or . . . She had been sent by the opponent firm. Decidedly not a good mood in which to approach Mr. Cuvier. When things went wrong with him his methods of redress were very primitive. He struck those who came within his reach.

Mary raised her head. "Mr. Cuvier, I have no hope you will believe me. I am fully aware of the apparent folly of my visit to you. But your option expires at six o'clock to-day."

A steely glint shot through his eyes. This was the last move. She was going to advocate some policy about the patent. This half-starved, simple-looking clerk was another spy. She had wormed herself into his pity. Was Mrs. Ellestree another tool?

Suspensions flashed across his brain with devilish activity. At every corner of his path Berryfield's had sent forth a stealthy tentacle: the network had closed round him. Now, for the first time, he saw the finger moving.

His face paled every so slightly. Those who knew Cuvier would not have felt comfortable if they had faced him now.

"Your option expires at six," Mary repeated, gaining courage by the announcement of the momentous fact. "That is why I am here, Mr. Cuvier."

The last test has failed. I am certain Sanders has had some hand in it. I implore you to take up the patent."

"Close?"

"Yes, you can. I know the money's waiting in the bank. Send it, I implore you, send it!"

"You know that Sanders has had some hand in the failure of the final test?"

"Yes."

"May I ask for your proofs?"

"I have none. I can only tell you."

"Not very reliable information on which to throw away ten thousand pounds."

"Oh, I know that. I know how hard it has been for you to get the money. But, knowing that, I beg of you to risk it."

"And why are you so concerned?"

"Because . . . because I want you to have it and not Sanders. He'll be ready—I know it."

"Really!"

Cuvier's eyebrows raised themselves. "I scarcely know on which to compliment you most—your touching confidence in my impressionability or the extent of your knowledge. Now, may I ask, how did you know the money's at the bank, that it had been hard for me to get it, and that I was not going to close?"

How did she know?

Officiously, memory hurried to her aid. Blankly she realised that Cobb had told her—Cobb, whom her sympathy had drawn on to confide—and she had come straight to Cuvier with his confidence.

The enormity of the situation crept slowly on her, slowly but inflexibly. She had been so wrapped up in her responsibilities that she had betrayed the trust which the boy had reposed in her. Cuvier's eyes

were burning into her. She clasped her hands together. Now for the first time she lost her self-possession. How could she tell him? She could not.

"Well?"

"I . . . I don't see that it matters how the information came." Her throat was parched and dry. Speech was a physical pain.

"It matters a good deal, because until this moment I imagined only one other person in the world shared my knowledge; and my decision *re* the patent can only have become the property of Berryfield's through this channel. I believe I have heard of you in a business capacity before. You are the late Mr. Berryfield's private secretary?"

"Yes."

Mary was sheet-white, her faculties were dazed. She could only answer the merciless cross-questioning.

"You have met Mr. Cobb?"

"Yes."

Again the helpless whisper. Something in the girl's face attracted the questioner's notice.

"More than once?"

"Yes."

Cuvier pressed the bell upon the table promptly.

"Ask Mr. Cobb to come here."

Mary had risen at the words; she broke in hoarsely—

"It's no use my staying. I came to tell you something for your good. I have done my share. I can't do any more. If you lose the patent, it's your fault, not mine!"

"Ah, Cobb; it's all right! Come in. Miss van Heyten is, I believe, a friend of yours."

Cobb stood by the door, his hands still on the knob; his eyes rested on Mary's in stupefaction. She dared

not look at him. There was a strange humming sound reverberating in her ears. Cuvier's voice sounded distantly.

"She has called on me to advise me to complete purchase of the patent. She is possessed of much information concerning my operations; information which by its nature must be of very recent date. Can you throw any light on Miss van Heyten's peculiar knowledge?"

"What is it, sir?"

Cobb's voice sounded far away. Mary waited for Cuvier's answer. She knew that it must come. It came.

"That the last test has failed: that the ten thousand is waiting at the bank; that I have obtained it at great sacrifice: and that at this last moment I am not going to complete purchase." The words came bitingly, cleaving the air with terrible distinctness.

"I told Miss van Heyten, sir."

"You?"

"Yes."

"May I ask why you were so astonishingly generous with information that I thought belonged to me?"

Silence again, a long silence broken by a harsh young voice whose words seemed wrung from it.

"I didn't know that I was telling her. I . . . I . . . I can't excuse myself."

No word from Mary.

What was there to say?

She had betrayed Cobb's confidence; had offered him up an anguished sacrifice on the fiery altar of her resolve.

Cobb's eyes were staring steadily in front of him: his set lips showed his hurt.

"It was foolish, Cobb: harmless in this case, because Berryfield's have used a clumsy tool; but

foolish because it is never wise to confide in the spies of one's enemies, even though their spy may be a pathetic-looking young woman."

"A spy, oh, you do not believe that?"

The appeal was not made to Cuvier. He had passed out of existence. For Mary, the drama centered round one figure, a boy's, whose drawn face told the bitterness of his suffering.

He had confided in a woman, and she had delivered his confidence into the hands of his idol. But she had not won that confidence by treachery! She had not sympathised to draw it from him.

Hayden Cobb raised his eyes. "No, I do not believe it."

Across the room his gaze met hers; she had not realised until that moment what it would have meant if he had failed her. He understood in the revulsion that followed her despair. She had stretched out her hand and found support.

Cobb's answer had not left Cuvier untouched. His trusted secretary had betrayed office secrets to this girl: and still he would not desert her.

"Would it be intruding on too private ground, if I asked the reason of your touching faith, Cobb?"

Cuvier's voice was icy-cold. Cobb read the inflection rightly.

He answered briefly, "I think her interest is bound up in Berryfield's. I do not think she realises what she is doing. She only thinks of Berryfield's. I volunteer the information. I was vain enough to think she was interested in me—I have no other excuse, sir."

With the same grim stoicism that had kept his father alone by the guns, amidst a horde of savages, Cobb opened his Holy of Holies and laid his sacred secret bare before the eyes of the man who mocked

at woman and held love weak madness; before the woman who had drawn him on to speak of the hopes and dreams he had guarded so jealously through all his life.

His blanched lips told the effort; he had pride, an inconvenient amount of it. But Cuvier must laugh: Mary must see his weakness. He could not shelter behind her treachery; she was a woman and must be defended. Pride, dignity and honour must go by the board: the straight, old-fashioned sense of chivalry stood highest.

And for Mary, the whole world changed colour and became at once more beautiful because of a boy's sense of manhood, and more desolate than it had ever been in all her grey young life, for in the words she read the death of all that Hayden Cobb had felt for her.

But he had stood for what was right—apart from personal feeling. With such an example she could do the same.

She hated Cuvier: hated to help him: but she must think impersonally. He had refused to be guided by her unsubstantiated warning. That did not relieve her from her trust.

The hands of the clock were travelling swiftly to the appointed hour. She must act, now, at whatever cost to Berryfield's. She drew herself up with a certain cold young dignity which both men perceived, and at which they mentally marvelled. Amazingly unsensitive—or amazingly self-controlled—the girl must be! Her voice had not a quiver in it as she spoke.

"There is no time now to explain. I will see you again, Mr. Cuvier."

Cuvier's reply was ineffective. She had gone, gone, leaving two men to bring their own little drama to a conclusion, the eternal drama of man's love which woman poisons.

Their relationship was not the first consideration in their minds, however, the sting remained in the background, a dull and aching soreness. Each was caught up in a tumult of confusion of which Mary was the centre.

Cuvier's thoughts were bent on the object of her interview. She could not have imagined he would take any notice of her warning, but if not, why warn him? Was she a tool of Berryfield's, an unconscious one? But even then, what purpose could Sanders have imagined she would serve? Or had she overheard something? Had she real knowledge? Then why bring it to him whom she hated? His eyes turned on Cobb in absolute puzzlement.

"Have you any clue, Cobb?"

"Not one."

"But you believe she's sincere?"

The boy hesitated. Mary had told him she knew nothing of what Berryfield's was doing and he found her here, with Cuvier, acting for Berryfield's. She had promised not to say a word to any one about the information he had so foolishly let out: and had brought it straight to Cuvier.

And yet—yet her serious grey eyes defended her. The ring of her voice, the clear, straightforward diction, above all the atmosphere of dignity and purity which emanated from her, sprang up, sturdy champions. He did believe in her. Against the verdict of common-sense, of smarting pride, of wounded love, he still believed! He had misread her interest in him, but she had some reason for her actions which justified them to her stern, pure conscience.

As the knight of old held his lady's gage against all odds, Hayden Cobb held high the gage of his belief.

"Yes, sir. I'd stake all I have that she is honest."

"Would you have closed, then?"

"No, sir. I think she jumps to conclusions: she is a woman."

"So it seems. You remember I warned you, Cobb."

The young man gazed straight in front of him, his set lips showed no movement, yet Cuvier's shot pierced home.

"Well, we can do nothing but wait for this last move of Berryfield's to disclose its fell intent! That'll do, Cobb!"

"Yes, sir. It's no use saying I'd have cut my tongue out if I'd have thought . . ."

"No use, Cobb, as long as you trust any woman. When time has laboriously hacked that trust away I will depend on you again."

Cobb went out. When, in one fell swoop, one stands bereft of love of woman and the trust of man, there is nothing for it but to bear in silence.

As for Cuvier, gambler with Life's metamorphoses, he sat back in his chair, and grimly estimated there would be a waiting time in front of him, till Sanders' hand showed itself. He might rest for a moment. It would be best to distract his mind from the fretting puzzles that surrounded the struggle—the struggle which either Fate had solved or Sanders won.

In the drawer of his desk a note lay that had arrived that morning.

"Have decided to join my husband in America. Leaving to-night. Good-bye."

So she was escaping too; he was losing on every side.

Not so!

An unpleasant smile that had no tenderness curved his mouth.

He drew a sheet of paper towards him: then, with deliberate intent, penned words which he knew would

bring Susan Ellestree to his feet. He told her he was ruined ; and he needed her.

It might be true: in any case he was no longer in the mood to wait with patience the fulfilment of desire. The chafing brute within him hungered for something it could hurt and master.

CHAPTER XIX

"Never fear but there's provision
Of the devil's to quench knowledge
Lest we walk the earth in rapture."

R. BROWNING

"WHY, Sue?"

Susan on her knees, surrounded by band-boxes, looked up with a cry which could not be construed into one of welcome.

"Ferroll! You shouldn't walk in like that!"

"I rang. As no one seemed to be at home and the door was left open, I thought I might as well come in. What are you doing? Spring-cleaning?"

Susan submitted to his salute with ill-concealed impatience.

"No, but I'm very busy. What did you want?"

"Only to see you."

"Well, I can't have you here: the flat's all shut up. I'm staying at the 'Cecil' with Rosalys. Have you heard she's going to be married?"

"Yes. Rather a decent chap. All right. I'll come too. I've left my bag in the hall. I'm at a loose end for the next three days. I go to Montrose on Saturday."

Mrs. Ellestree pulled out hats in a rather unfriendly silence. Ferrol sat down in the one arm-chair and studied her with a growing suspicion which he was careful to conceal. His next question came casually.

"Heard anything of Mary?"

"Nothing." Mrs. Ellestree rose with a handful of motor-veils, and crossing to the dressing-table stood with her back to him. In the looking-glass Ferroll observed her lips were pursed up obstinately as she folded the veils into the scanty compass of a cretonne-covered box.

"Are you going away?" asked Ferroll.

Mrs. Ellestree took great pains to fit the last veil in and shut the box before she answered.

"For a little while."

"Where?"

"I'm not quite certain."

"With whom? Rosalys?"

"Oh, my dear Ferroll, what has it to do with you where I'm going, or with whom?" Susan pulled a drawer out in positive ill-temper.

"There's nothing very extraordinary in the question," Ferroll answered reasonably. "What's put you out?"

"Nothing."

When Mrs. Ellestree retired into the fastnesses of dignity, those who knew her best, knew better than to follow. Susan, arranging glove-boxes with the air of an early Roman empress, was not a person to be bullied or persuaded. Ferroll abandoned his attempts at casual chat, and rose, hurt in his turn.

"All right. I'm off if you don't want me. I suppose you've heard Tom's coming back?"

"Yes."

"Oh! And he's told you his plans?"

"D'you mean about America?"

Susan's voice was very hard. Ferroll noticed the suppressed resentment that lay behind the monotonous tone.

"Yes. That's really why I came up. However, I'll wait till you're in a different mood."

"If you've anything to tell me, you'd better say it now."

Mrs. Ellestree still kept her face averted; Ferroll detected a slight change in her previous inaccessibility.

"Oh no. It'll keep. It's the greatest piece of luck, your going at this moment."

Mrs. Ellestree's fine figure stood motionless, arrested in the act of depositing glove-boxes, veils and handkerchiefs upon the bed. Her back was turned to Ferroll, but he was struck by the oddness of her attitude. It was almost as if she had heard a warning. When she spoke, her voice came rather strange.

"What d'you mean by that?"

"I'll tell you in America. I've been offered a billet there."

Mrs. Ellestree crossed slowly to the bed, laid her burden thereon, and turned, facing the speaker. She met his gaze coldly.

"I don't think you'll find me in America," she said.

"But Tom wrote . . ."

"Oh, you'll see Tom. He won't miss me very much, will he?"

"But Tom says he's given notice for the lease . . . you can't stop here. He'd never let you."

"No. I'm sure he wouldn't." Mrs. Ellestree smiled hardly. "And, you see, I'm equally determined not to go to Tom."

Ferroll was emphatically a man of action; he also possessed instinct that was almost feminine.

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Susan," said he. "You've always longed to see America. It's been one of our dreams."

"I've woke up, you see," Mrs. Ellestree answered; she put her hand upon the bed-rail.

Should she tell Ferroll? There had always been supreme confidence between them . . . except

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with regard to Tom. There, Susan owed another loyalty.

Now in this poignant crisis of her life she wanted Ferroll's sympathy. She knew that he would give it. He was not conventional. He knew all there was to know of life and shared Susan's philosophic and impersonal attitude towards it.

Yes. She might tell Ferroll with impunity. It was not a pleasant thing to tell, but she would rather he heard it from her lips than from any one else's. It would hurt him. She knew that it would hurt him, but not so much if she confided in him. Not so much as if he came . . . to find her gone . . . to hear after it was over . . . perhaps from strangers . . . of the step that she was taking.

Ferroll had concealed escapades from her. The sting lay not so much in his wrong-doing, as in the fact that he had kept his experiences from her.

She would not let him suffer as he, perhaps unconsciously, had made her suffer.

She spoke out plainly.

"Some one's awakened me. I have the chance of living, Ferroll: and I'm going to take it."

"What is the chance?" asked Ferroll. He stood like a youthful Daniel, facing her.

Mrs. Ellestree took a deep breath, then lifted her head defiantly.

"I don't see why I need mind telling you, as everybody will know in a few days' time," she said harshly. "I'm going away with the only man I've ever seen whom I could love. I know perfectly well what I shall lose; but I shall gain a good deal. I . . . I've thought it all out. I'm not a girl, I'm a woman; I shall soon be old; and I want happiness."

She ended with a sudden breaking-down. Suddenly she felt Ferroll's arm around her shoulders. Her face was buried in the pillows.

"Poor old Sue! Poor old Sue!"

He made no comment on what she had told him. The sobs lessened in violence; presently she sat up, drying her eyes, and patting her hair into some sort of order.

"I'm a perfect fool. It is funny how women cling to the conventional, even when it has nothing that we want, to give us. But . . . oh, Ferroll, I'm so unhappy. Don't preach! I shall go mad if you begin! It won't do any good. I've made my mind up. We start by the boat-express to-night. I dine with him first at the 'Continental.' Oh, why shouldn't I be looking forward to it? Why shouldn't it be a wedding-feast? I'm in love with him, and you know as well as I do that marriage is only a convention, and we have too much brain to be the puppets of convention, only . . . how strong it is in us!"

Susan crossed to the dressing-table and dabbed a powder-puff upon her face.

Ferroll was staring at her helplessly. It was the old Sue who spoke: Sue, who treated all things with philosophy, yet not the sister he had known. The philosophic words come strangely from her parched lips. Burning-eyed, she looked at him: a new spirit filled her. There was no protection, no divine renunciation in her gaze now: this woman demanded, claimed, extorted. He was at sea. He had always come to Susan with his troubles, his affairs: now he felt pushed out of her arena. Suddenly a wall divided them, and on the other side, Sue turned to satisfy her hunger . . . leaving him . . .

Leaving him for what? The thought of Cuvier came to him, making him sick and terrified. Sue in the hands of such a man! It was one thing to know Cuvier; even to like him. Another—quite another—to think of Susan helpless at his mercy.

"My darling girl, you can't do this thing, it's madness"

"Sheer, unquestioned madness, Ferroll! D'you think I don't know. Oh, my dear, I've counted the cost for three weary days. I refused to pay, at first: so he went. I have starved since then: now I can't haggle. I must have him. I love him."

"If you would only hold tight for a few days, you would conquer. I've felt like you feel: think how you've talked to me."

"You? Oh, my dear, you have wasted your love; it has lit a hundred fires. I have never yielded. All the years of my life I have repressed self. First for you; when I was a little girl I played the part of mother to you, and felt a mother's cares! My girlhood's dreams were dreams of a lover who would help me to make you happy. I married so that I could set you free."

"That's it." Ferroll caught at a straw of hope. "Think of poor old Tom. It isn't fair to him. Think how good he's been to us all these years. It will be so hard on him."

"Hard on Tom!"

Mrs. Ellestree's voice rang with a curious inflection. She leaned against the bedroom looking out, past Ferroll, upward through the window, as if she were seeing farther than the tree-tops. Her lips smiled a little—not a pleasant smile.

"Hard on Tom! How little people know of one another. You to say I'm hard on Tom! Yes, I'm hard now. But when I married, I wasn't. I said I married Tom to help you. I didn't say how passionately grateful I was. I didn't tell you what a romantic idealist I was then! You know how I love making people happy. I came to London full of hopes and plans for Tom's happiness. I was to be such a strength to him! I was to share all his ambitions and his

interests. I was to help him. He let me talk like that . . . during the honeymoon. It filled up the time between the kisses. Then we came home. Two days after, I went down to his office to walk back with him. . . . It was the night of his dining-club at the Savoy, a man's club which met to eat . . . He had intended to wire me; naturally he was irritated when I arrived. He hated women in his office, too. His men friends might call in for him, not his wife. Only two days in London, and I learnt where the woman's place was—in the home her master had provided, waiting his pleasure! . . . We made friends again . . . then there came other quarrels . . . I never told you . . . you were only a boy, and I didn't want to spoil our home for you . . .”

“I guessed.”

“Did you? Well you saw how hard I struggled for comradeship, till I realised it was all no use and grew philosophic. I tried to build up a life of my own, matching my old ideals as well as I could. I'm a conservative person, you know, and while no other man appeared upon the scene, my husband filled the place of pivot. But I was hungry! I starved inwardly, craving for affection and comradeship. You see you were young, and full of your own affairs.”

“Oh, Sue! If I could go back again! I've been rotten to you.”

“No, dear, it was only natural you should have wanted to live your own life by yourself. I understood. I never blamed you for leaving me. But I have always been lonely. I've never had a life of my own; I've always lived on the edge of other people's. Now that a man comes who needs me and whom I need, I possess no safeguard that can hold me from him. Knowing what sort of husband Tom has been to me, I feel no loyalty. As for the sacredness of marriage . . . Tom owns me legally, but his soul has refused to

even speak with mine. Now do you understand why I am going away?"

"Yes, yes! If I could be sure you were going to happiness, I'd be the first to help you. But Cuvier . . . it is Cuvier, isn't it? . . . Cuvier's got such a rotten reputation. Of course, if you know he's going to marry you . . ."

The woman put up her hands before her face with a sudden throb; her shoulders shook with passionate agony. Her native honesty could not let her lie even to save her deepest pride.

"No. He won't marry me. Oh, Ferroll, women have envied the worship men have given me, yet there is no man in the world who is prepared to offer me the simple human life I crave for. A man's love, children, peace!"

Thus did Susan Ellestree lay down her sovereignty before the brother who had knelt before her: who knelt now.

"Oh, Sue, Sue! If I could die to help you!"

The sound of the boy's grief brought Susan back to ordinary life again—the life where she protected people, comforting and soothing. She bent down over Ferroll's waving hair, full of his sorrow, forgetful of her own.

"You silly boy! I'm a happy woman. Yes, happy, Ferroll! Directly I see him, all my doubts and troubles will be gone. After all, what do the little man-made conventions count? I have tried marriage and respectability, it hasn't brought much satisfaction, has it? There is nothing in the world that can bring joy to a woman but love—the love that will give all. He is ruined. He wants me by him now, to comfort him, and soothe, and help him. He . . . who is so strong."

"Ruined?"

"He says so: there is at least grave chance of it."

Think! He has written to me, to ask me to be merciful and come. Oh, Ferroll, I touched heaven when I read that letter. If I were to lose my whole life for it, I would not refuse him now he needs me."

Divine the love and pity which shone in Susan's eyes. If Cuvier wished for an unholy love, even he would find it hard to desecrate and pull down to grossness the fire that lit her soul.

"But, Susan . . . if he has lost his money, what of your look-out?"

"I?"

"He'll have to make some provision for you. Tom will divorce you."

"Well?"

"Well . . . if Cuvier hasn't money . . . he won't be able to settle anything upon you . . . if . . . anything happens. It can't last, you know."

"And do you think that I'd take Simeon Cuvier's money if he had done with me. Why you talk as if this love of mine was bought."

Susan had raised herself; she looked over Ferroll's head with a glory in her eyes. She was giving generously and she knew it: abandoning everything, the worship that meant so much to her; security that meant so much; her pride, her dignity, her self-control, all were for him, to tread into the dust, to rise against her, to pierce her to the heart. She kept no weapon.

And for reward? She wanted nothing. Only that he should satisfy his need.

"But, Susan, you must live. Poverty would be hell to you: the disgrace will be bad enough."

"I want to suffer for him! If he goes, I shall kill myself."

"You say that now."

"I mean it."

"Yes!"

Ferroll had risen: he turned away from her, with the touch of irritation which his sister's invincible finality always occasioned in him. He knew too well.

"You mean it now. I mean things; but I don't do them. We've the same blood in our veins. Life calls too loudly to us. Life! We want to drain it. That's why you're going to Cuvier. But listen, Sue. You've made me hear reason, it's only fair you should let me give some back to you. The day will come when he will go from you, and as sure as that day comes, so surely will you live. You'll mean to die, but when it comes to shutting out the sunshine, and the moonlight, and the trees, and the sea, and taste, and touch, and beauty for nothingness—grey nothingness—you won't do it! Then where will you be if you're left without a penny?"

"I could earn my living."

"How? Work will be shut to you. You'll have lost your reputation. Besides, the life you'll lead with Cuvier won't fit you for drudgery. No. You'll struggle for a time, then you'll grow desperate. Remember! Cuvier will kill your self-respect. You'll be driven to where other women as good, as proud, as delicate as you have gone. If Cuvier doesn't provide for you . . ."

"Better that . . . than his money! The other women have taken that. At least, he shall find me different there!"

"You know his life . . ."

"I know it through and through."

"And knowing it, you give yourself!"

"He needs me, and I want him."

The cry burst from her, tearing her heart with it. What use all this arguing and prating? Her lover needed her. She only knew that. Dark stretched his past, dark stretched the future; but she stood in

a blaze of glory, soon to be consummated in unearthly rapture.

No one lived but him. Tom, Ferroll, Rosalys, were as pale ghosts in a world of shadows. All rooms were empty where he was not. All prospects futile that did not centre round him.

Woman was for man. She rejoiced that she had always held that gospel, that she had so perfected soul and body that they found favour in her lover's eyes and he had stretched forth his hand for her.

If he had not wanted her! There had been the tragedy. Wanting her, life was an ecstatic pæan—a consummation of her rarest hopes.

And this shadowy ghost would hold her back for fear that the future would see her unprovided for. At that moment Susan would have forded raging seas, or cloven a fiery screen to reach her lover.

The feverish miserable recklessness had vanished: she stood superb in a white fire of passion, so intense that her senses became stilled and she could look down on Ferroll and laugh.

Ghosts to keep her from her lover!

"Oh, Sue, Sue, do nothing for a day or two. You'll come out of this mood. You're like me. I know you!"

So cried Ferroll, meeting his own likeness in his sister, and sick with horror at the sight of it. This mood would send her headlong to Cuvier's grasp; on the morrow she would wake to wisdom!

"You have never felt as I do now."

She could speak calmly, even smile. How vague and shadowy his passions were!

"That's it. I can forget. You won't be able to. I regret . . . and the devil sends me pricking on again. You'll never stop regretting. I hunger . . . and find new fruits daily. You'll starve for the one that you can't have. Oh, Susan, think."

"Go! Go!"

She recoiled from him. His words were hurting, though desire still clamoured. He could not check her now, he could only stir up the doubts that tortured her.

"You can do no good, I am past helping. Go."

Ferroll read an irrevocable decision in her eyes. He came up to her and put his arms about her, holding her to him silently.

Foolish little memories came rushing back to him of one day when his child's heart had nearly broken because he was not allowed to go to a friend's party; dancing was not approved of! Of other times when a bad report seemed an irretrievable calamity, when his head ached and lessons must still be toiled through, of a whole week's deprivation of sugar in his tea; and every time of Susan's sympathy. Her loving arms had sent all grief away; in them, he had sheltered. And he had done nothing for her. Yes, one thing; she had misjudged him there.

He pressed his face against hers as he had used to do in the miserable days of childhood.

"Sue, dear, I didn't make love to Mary, honour . . . I held out. I told her what I was. It saved her."

"Oh, why did you speak of her?"

Mrs. Ellestree had drawn away from him, she had grown to sudden whiteness.

"I wanted you to know."

"She over-estimated me, ridiculously, but . . . oh, that's the only thing I care about. It was so wonderful to be loved as a mother's loved! She'll never feel anything to me again, but . . . What a fool I am! There! I can't talk sense to-day. Go, I'll write to you and tell you . . . how we get on. Good-bye, don't touch me, if you love me, go!"

Ferroll obeyed her. His heart was aching, he knew that all he could say, all he could do, was useless.

As he went, a mocking knowledge came to him that as he felt now, so must Susan have felt impotent and wretched over and over again in the long-away past, when she had tried to hold him back . . . and had failed.

CHAPTER XX

"'Tis an awkward thing to play with souls."

R. BROWNING, *A Light Woman*.

MARY had been right!

The hurrying bustle of the City encompassed her. The passers-by jostled her, impeding, hindering. Mary walked on, unheeding. London no longer frightened her. She had staked and won. Had pitted instinct and intuition against men's rascality and caution; and had won.

She had reached the lawyer's office on the stroke of five. The letters-patent now were in her hands. It was late, for there had been doubt about her cheque. The inventor had insisted on sending to the bank before acceptance. But at last they had had to yield. She had come on behalf of Mr. Cuvier; the cheque was good. The money had been placed upon the table—before six!

Strange, how a moment alters circumstances. An hour since Mary had stood helpless in a storm of buffets, now by a stroke of the pen she had surmounted all. She had dared to risk her intuition. The patent was still untested, but Sanders had sent his cheque; that verified her suspicion.

In any case, she had vindicated Berryfield's. If the patent proved worthless, the loss was hers. If it proved of value, the advantage was Cuvier's. Her sincerity could not be questioned now.

She had emerged from Cuvier's office ashamed and

trembling; she re-entered with the assured step of the victor.

Cuvier was still at his desk: his amazed expression was intensified by Mary's words.

"The patent is yours, Mr. Cuvier. Reich has accepted my cheque on your behalf."

"Your . . . cheque . . ."

"Yes. I am Berryfield's. It was left to me."

"So *that* explains . . ."

Cuvier's gaze rested on Mary with a volte-face that was as complete as it was unconscious. Mary possessed Berryfield's. She was a power. For the girl clerk, poor, dependent, the possible tool or honest blundering meddler, he felt nothing but a contempt which might instigate him to kindness or brutality according to his mood. For the girl who owned the biggest steel works in the country, and not only owned but managed it, he felt a respect which would cause him to treat her with cold justice. He tortured weakness as a cat a mouse; he met strength in fair battle.

That Mary possessed power, atoned for the fact of her womanhood. He saw courage in her eyes: he recognised decision, capability, intelligence in her bearing: he read strength in her square jaw and firm mouth. He was no longer man, trampling on her womanhood. She had power!

Now he could appreciate her sense of honour.

"The honour of Berryfield's is worth ten thousand pounds to me."

"But my dear Miss van Heyten, this patent is worthless. If it had not been, I should have taken up my option."

"Sanders' cheque was in the lawyer's hands. I overheard your conversation when Mr. Cobb came down to fetch you; I went to Birmingham next day—Sanders had taken out an option on the patent in his own name; Denvers had formed a syndicate to

enable him to purchase. My lawyer understood the option was taken on behalf of Berryfield's. Sanders had signed another document, making himself assignee. I had brain-fever directly after your messenger arrived with the first hint of Sanders' duplicity; he knew when I came back his opportunity would be at an end."

"And why, in the name of all that's reasonable, didn't you tell me this this morning?"

"Because you might not have believed me: and you might have stopped me purchasing the patent. It was not only Sanders I was fighting. Now you have the patent, you can say nothing against Berryfield's!"

Cuvier was face to face with a difficult proposition: Fortune's wheel had revolved to good purpose and had placed his right within his hand, yet had placed an obligation in the other which it was impossible to ignore as it was impossible to refuse. By every canon of equity and justice, the patent should fall to him who had first acquired it, and paid for its proving, who, moreover had been tricked into failing to complete the purchase. And yet his rival's generosity had saved him: saved him moreover at the cost of her prosperity. The acquisition of the patent spelt monopoly: he might regard the purchase as a loan; but obligation still remained.

His gaze sought Mary perplexedly. She was confronting him with an expression which he found hard of comprehension.

"This is a most difficult thing to accept."

His face was puckered whimsically. A ghost of a smile hovered on the powerful features. The young woman opposite wore so stern an aspect. There was no gracefulness about her: uncompromisingly she had fulfilled the demands of justice.

"There's no question about accepting anything. The patent was yours, and I've prevented one of my

employees robbing you. There's nothing to be grateful for."

"All the same, I'm in a very different position to where I was an hour ago." Cuvier paused a moment: "and so are you. Have you realised what this patent means to the firm which holds it?"

Mary's eyes flashed one answering look: into it was compressed a good deal.

"You seem to think I'm an amateur in business, Mr. Cuvier. I'd have closed with Reich on what he first brought you. Sanders went through everything with me. It's a gold-mine."

"And yet you hand it over?"

"If you'd been me, would you have bought out Sanders and stuck to it?"

The contempt in Mary's voice made Cuvier's face flush.

"Of course not, but . . . I was under the impression you hadn't a great opinion of me."

Mary preserved an austere silence. Grim humour woke in Cuvier's eyes.

"That you regarded me as a hopeless *flâneur*, a corrupter of morals, a too philosophic observer and experiencer of life."

"I regard you as a man without honour, I admit."

The words lashed back. For all his calm, they stung. Cuvier lifted his head with a rather ugly look.

"I beg your pardon."

Mary's face was quite white; out of it, her eyes regarded him resistlessly, pools of liquid fire. Her voice came in dry clipped accents, from which all emotion was erased by the very depth of her intensity.

"You are punctilious about accepting the fulfilment of a moral obligation, Mr. Cuvier. Your chivalry prevents you, I suppose, even though there was no possible course open to me as an honourable business woman except to place this patent in your hands. It isn't your honour that's making me keep my trust.

It's mine. And it's just because I despise you, that I was all the more anxious to wash my hands of any stain that had been brought there through one of my servants wronging you."

"Supposing I refuse to accept your gift?"

"You can hand it over to Sanders, if you like. He would be the only one to benefit. He has nothing now to do with Berryfield's."

Cuvier bit his lips. It was the most ridiculous *impasse*. Common-sense told him refusal was impossible, yet self-respect resented the girl's attitude. So might a contemptuous goddess have tossed a fortune to a leper.

"There is nothing more to say, I think. Any further communications, if they are necessary, can be made through your lawyer. Good-morning."

Mary had turned towards the door with the air of one who shook the dust off her feet, resolutely and for ever.

"One moment!"

Mary stopped, arrested by the tone.

"One moment, please! In justice to me, you must tell me what is the reason of your irreconcilable attitude towards me. How have I transgressed against you?"

"I disapprove of you."

Cuvier took his cigar out of his mouth and leant back imperturbably.

"Disapprove of me? But one must take people as one finds them. I have never forced my views of life on you. I have respected your confidence on the rare occasions when you have reposed it in me. I admit I was severe on you an hour or two ago, but I am sure you will have the fairness to admit the circumstances seemed to justify me."

"What does it matter what I think of you?"

"This. That I can't accept your generosity without some sort of recompense. I'm not speaking of the

money. Of course that will be refunded to you. But I am referring to your generosity of motive. Now don't stop being generous. Let us make a deal together. Let us go shares in the patent."

It was a big offer; big as the man who made it. For one moment Mary's cheeks flushed with overwhelming relief. Berryfield's might still hold up its head.

"You are offering this . . . in gratitude."

"In common equity. You've done a big thing for me. I don't like being in your debt. I want to do some big thing for you. After all, you're a woman. The obligation can't be on my side! You must let me pay my debt."

"By letting me into the patent?"

"That seems to me the only way."

"There is another way!"

"Another?"

Mary clasped her hands; a sudden inspiration had come to her, one that solved the fear that had been haunting her behind the business strain. The honour of Berryfield's was saved. The soul of a woman was still in danger. There are times when responsibilities conflict.

Mary's thoughts had flown to Mrs. Ellestree. If she might save her, so. She spoke resolutely

"Promise me never to see Mrs. Ellestree again!"

"Why, in Heaven's name, not?"

Mary gazed round the room, then brought her eyes back desperately to Cuvier. It was almost impossible to speak before his sneering presence; far, far more difficult than discussing business. Yet the sense of responsibility, which was so strong within her, pushed her forward. The words came in despair of comprehension, yet unflinchingly.

"She was happy before you knew her . . . you've spoilt her happiness. It doesn't matter to you. You have your business, but she has nothing. And she is

good, I know she is good, and she'll never be happy unless she's good. She's not like Miss Benton. She's so proud. You say you've been fair to me. You've been fair because I don't attract you, and you're too indifferent to want anything from me. But when you want a woman, you take, and take, and take! You want everything she has—her loyalty, her interest, her confidence, her whole affection! All her thoughts and admiration must be yours! And in return, you think it's splendid payment if you just accept. Your self remains your own, you won't give a little bit of it away!"

Quivering, raw, the words seemed still to vibrate through the atmosphere, though the speaker had stopped half-horrified at her daring, half-defiant of the consequences.

Rage at the girl's presumption dominated Cuvier, yet under his pride's quick response something nobler had been touched. The courage which had forced the words forth, the devotion which rang in every accent, held his notice. His first impulse had been to order Mary from the room. His second, to answer cynically. When he spoke, he found he was defending himself.

"I am not going to discuss my relations with anybody, Miss van Heyten. Let me point out that no one can determine what constitutes right or wrong for any living soul except themselves. Every one must form his own standard. What I feel for Mrs. Ellestree is a matter which concerns only her and me; when you have lived longer and seen more, you will know how impossible it is for you to govern people according to your ideas of what is right."

The last words stung a little. In spite of his philosophy Cuvier felt antagonism to the slight figure which faced him so inflexibly. His words sounded false, even to himself, against the knowledge which pricked within him. Mary could not know of his

reply to Mrs. Ellestree's communication or of her "express" answer.

His conscience was supersensitive, he told himself.

Yet before Mary's eyes the angry feeling grew. He had lied, and she knew it. He lost his self-possession, fell to blustering.

"You don't pause to think how Mrs. Ellestree would like all this? Perhaps you think she would be grateful to you for making her out a fool. As a person who respects Mrs. Ellestree . . ."

"Oh, don't, don't!" Piteously the words thrilled, hushed and anguished. "Think what women are to you! It makes me sting with shame. Can't women see? Can't they feel how your mockery reflects on all of them? Don't dare to say you respect Mrs. Ellestree. You want to pull her down because she's strong. You want to feel her master! And then, when you're master, and your vanity is satisfied, and she has nothing more to give you, you will have won and the game will be finished . . . and she . . . oh, she'll be lost."

"You're talking about things you've had no chance to know anything about!"

"You can't hurt me!" Mary's head was raised. Her eyes rested on him with a divine personality rather than contempt. She no longer felt defiance; only the tragic sorrow of his power and purpose. "But you can hurt her. The awful thing is that she cares. Oh, if she could see you as I see you; if she could only see you as the poor, selfish and ignoble thing you are! But she can't. And she's by herself. She has nothing to fill up your place, nothing to take hold of. She's at your mercy. If you've any pity in you, think if you *dare* hurt her so."

Her heart was filled with a passion of love to Susan Ellestree. Pity of women filled her. Their helplessness! Their helplessness! Man had his work, but woman's bread depended on him, her every reason of

existence. And man used his power for his own purposes; not as his trust.

Cuvier did not answer.

He had an unfortunate sense of justice which was stronger than his pride or selfishness, and on which Mary had not counted. Mary's words had touched this sense.

What was he taking from Mrs. Ellestree? Her whole life.

What could he give her? A fragment of his interest.

To be tied to her, share her lot, give up London, business, travel with her, make acquaintances with her, in short, live together, would be hell. Nothing would make him do it; nothing would make him faithful either.

Yet he was expecting her to give him all. That was the triumph and pleasure; the security. To rest in illimitable devotion . . . for a week or two. It would mean nothing more. His nerves demanded rest for a few days; then he must come back to fling himself into the struggle. Now that the patent was his, it must be put upon the market. Business would engross him utterly.

A week's rest. He would rest even better without Susan's demand, her passionate demand, upon his interest. He was tired, and Susan was in love. His passion was appeased by this unexpected new prosperity. His thoughts turned to the possibilities of this marvellous, all-conquering patent; it engulfed him, assuaging thirst, steadying his fever.

Give up Mrs. Ellestree? He did not want her! It was not only easy to accede to Mary's wish, it was a relief.

He spoke without hesitation.

"If the promise is of moment to you I will give it."

"You will never see her?"

"Not voluntarily. I will never speak to her."

"Nor communicate with her in any way?"

"Precisely. Do you desire to have it in writing?"

An ugly humour lurked in Cuvier's speech.

Mary's face showed no sign of appreciation.

"Yes."

"You will put it to no . . . purpose?"

"I shall show it to Mrs. Ellestree."

"Your methods are drastic, Miss van Heyten. In courtesy to Mrs. Ellestree, I must insist on writing to her to . . . well, I can hardly say explain."

"I will do that."

"You?"

"Write your letter. I will take it."

Cuvier's gaze travelled over the Puritanical rigidity in front of him. He bent his head down and scribbled a line, carelessly. Then held it out, a smile curving his lips.

"Do you want to read it?"

There was a note of contempt in the lazy inflection. Mary drew herself up with dignity.

"No, I take your word."

"I assure you it is a most effectual . . . closure!" Cuvier fluttered the paper in his hand, looking at the girl before him.

"Do you intend to convey the news?"

"I shall take her your letter."

"You are a brave woman."

Mary's face was pale, her eyes burnt with the fire of martyrdom.

"I must do it."

"You have all the heroic virtues! Well, there's the paper. I thank you again. I suppose you would find it difficult to believe that I am acquiring an unwilling respect for you."

Mary did not trouble to reply. She went out blindly; one thought danced before her. She must go to Mrs. Ellestree. She had not quavered at the thought of plunging into the business battle; but now

her heart was faint. She saw Mrs. Ellestree's proud face, heard her dignified cold words. She trembled before the coming interview. Yet . . . she must go through with it.

Duty is a cruel task-master. Its slave went miserably forward.

CHAPTER XXI

"I played for life, a little life, and now—
Come Death!
There is no life for me."

FREDERICK FENN, *Amasis*.

"MARY!"

Mrs. Ellestree had opened the door. She was veiled and hatted; within the open bedroom-door boxes were piled up, strapped and ready.

"What do you want?"

Mrs. Ellestree was in her most formidable mood. Cold and dignified, she held open the door, regarding Mary as she might have regarded some officious inter-loper trying to force a way into her privacy.

"I must see you."

"I am afraid I am just going."

"I have a letter for you."

"For me?"

The woman paled, some warning instinct touched her. She stood with her eyes fixed on the girl, no softness in them now. Susan Ellestree had burnt her boats, honesty prevented her from making any bid for Mary's love. It must go with the wreckage.

"I wont keep you long."

Mrs. Ellestree led the way into the sitting-room. There was a strange look about it, the book-shelves had gaps in them, a couple of Mrs. Ellestree's favourite prints, birthday-gifts from Ferroll, were missing.

These things struck the girl's notice indistinctly, she was conscious of a vague discomfort.

"Well?"

Mrs. Ellestree was fronting her uncompromisingly. Her dark blue travelling suit gave her a sober look. Mary experienced her original sense of disadvantage before this perfectly appointed woman of the world. If Mary's line of conduct had seemed presumptuous in Cuvier's office, how much more did it appear so in Mrs. Ellestree's actual presence.

The girl whom Mr. Berryfield had trusted had more than the usual courage, however; there could be no question as to the wisdom or the justice of her course of action.

"I am sorry to have to keep you; I must explain that Berryfield's belongs to me."

"Berryfield's!"

The information was so unexpected that Mrs. Ellestree lost her composure.

"Mr. Berryfield left everything to me."

"And you concealed it!"

Mrs. Ellestree stared at the girl in stupefaction. Mary was an heiress, of wealth and of importance! The revelation was preposterous.

"Why did you hide the fact?"

"My lawyer advised it for business reasons."

Again the room seemed to have become of cramped dimensions, too small to hold this expanding personality.

A sense of annoyance, of foolish condescension, of absurd patronage came over Mrs. Ellestree. She had been kind to Mary, had given her presents of frocks and hats, had bought her gloves, shoes, trinkets; had tried to train her into eligibility, and all the time she had been benefitting a personage, one who concealed her identity for "business reasons."

The position of omnipotence which Mrs. Ellestree

had assumed with Mary had faded utterly. It was not only that Mrs. Ellestree did not like to be made to feel of secondary importance. She had imagined she possessed Mary's entire confidence, that she filled Mary's horizon, shedding a wise and benign influence over Mary's whole scheme of life. That Mary had kept all that was vital from her, wounded her to the heart.

Mary's defection had hurt her, this revelation struck chill to her soul.

Poor Susan Ellestree! Bitterly she was to learn the lesson of humanity's aloofness. Ties are so soon broken. Ferroll had leant upon her once, he stood alone. She had bent down to succour Mary, and Mary had been hiding a magic weapon all the time! Only Cuvier needed her; if he did not . . . !

She spoke feverishly, choking back the sick fear in her heart.

"So you stayed in my house in a false position, keeping me in ignorance of your identity? Do you call that honest?"

"I did not think of it in that light."

Mary's fingers closed more tightly on the letter. Her mission was harder than she had anticipated.

"I should have told you when I left, if you had not known Mr. Cuvier."

"I fail to see how my acquaintance with Mr. Cuvier concerns you."

"He is our biggest rival. My firm and his have been engaged in a great struggle. While I have been ill, my manager has been acting dishonestly. I overheard something on the night when Mr. Cuvier returned to town which made it essential that I should go back to look into things. I found that Mr. Cuvier had been unfairly treated. I had to put things right. I have put things right. Mr. Cuvier thought he had lost a patent on which

he had built his hopes. I have secured it for him."

"I hope Mr. Cuvier is grateful!"

Mary's previous disclosure had hurt Mrs. Ellestree; her last words whipped her jealousy to madness. Mary was Cuvier's rival; Mary had put things right for him! Mary was out on the great battle-ground where in her heart of hearts she knew Cuvier's chief interests centered. Mary knew him there, fought with him, rendered service to him!

Memory flashed back to that night when he had left her waiting, forgotten. The syren's voice had called to Mary too. Both Cuvier and she had obeyed its summons; both had deserted Mrs. Ellestree to fight together. She had been out of it! More, this loss of his had been readjusted. Mary had removed the "difficulties" of which in a rare moment of expansion, he had written. He would no longer need her comforting, no longer crave, dispirited and ruined, for the solace of her presence.

Steel-like, Mrs. Ellestree's eyes rested on the girl. She to have done Cuvier a service! This provincial typist whom Mrs. Ellestree's training had shaped into some fair semblance of womanhood!

In that one blinding moment, her love for Mary utterly departed. She saw in her the apotheosis of successful independence. This unattractive, inexperienced girl, who wanted nothing from Cuvier, for whom Cuvier cared nothing, had been of use to him: was of consequence in his eyes; while she had no power; while she did not even know of his dangers or understand his all absorbing business.

She had known how slight a part love of women played in his full life: she had never realised how slight till she was face to face with the girl who had met Cuvier on man's ground.

The sneer came from pale lips; it fell futilely.

"Yes, he is very grateful. He . . . he asked me to let him repay me."

Mary's voice was failing. The passion in Mrs. Ellestree's eyes unnerved her. She held out the letter blindly.

"I asked him . . . to give me . . . this . . ."

"For me?"

Mrs. Ellestree looked at the inscription stupidly. She knew . . . before she opened it. Something gripped at her heart; a fear so numbing that she dare not open the folded scrap of paper which held . . . what?

Something terrible. She knew it.

"What is in it?"

The words came in a husky whisper. Mary, looking at the woman's face, began to tremble in her certainty. There was fear in Mrs. Ellestree's eyes—terrific, blinding fear. She temporised weakly.

"I haven't seen."

"But you know. You asked him . . . tell me."

Mary pressed her hand hard upon the table. She could not look at Mrs. Ellestree. It is not easy to deal forth a death sentence.

"He has promised me he will never see you again."

With a quick tear Mrs. Ellestree ripped the envelope apart, the paper trembled in her hand. She held it steady with the other, and read.

There was silence. Then the paper fluttered out of Mrs. Ellestree's grasp. She stood there motionless, seeing, hearing nothing.

"I have promised Miss van Heyten never to see you again. She has decreed I must so pay a debt of honour. Youth has judged us with its usual intolerance."

Banishment was not enough; he must laugh; he could laugh. "Some day he will send his secretary:"

not his secretary—a girl instead. Her niece, her *protégée*, her worshipper.

He owed a debt, and paid it by putting her out of his life as he had put the others from it, with as little feeling. And his decision was irrevocable. She knew that from the wording. He sacrificed her callously, to pay a debt of honour to Mary! Mary had exacted that as payment. Mary!

With a cry as of a wounded beast she turned upon her.

“How dared you do this?”

Flaming-eyed, she towered above the girl, majestic in her fury—lost to all sense but one of searing rage against the girl who had dared to step between her and her so-long-awaited, so hardly-hoped-for joy.

All her life had been one waiting: and now when consummation was within an hour's attainment it had been snatched from her by another woman. A woman of the class whom she despised and hated: the woman who worked side by side with man, to whom he paid his debts of honour as to man; the woman who had her own life, her independence. She, the woman who had lived her life for man, was set aside for the woman who walked free, meeting his eyes fairly; setting no traps to capture him.

Susan Ellestree had professed contempt of working women all her life. She knew now why she hated them.

By his senses man may be befooled and lured to capture; but man has another side which recognises brave qualities irrespective of sex. Honesty, valour, austere justice command his respect in woman as in man.

How dared she? Mary was to ask that question of herself through many days to come.

Her heart bled for the other woman's pain, but she adhered strenuously to her code. It hurt her to the

soul to deal forth righteousness, but duty held her. Of women like Mary are martyrs made.

"You are married. You must not love him. It is wrong."

"Must not . . . Wrong . . . Say those words to the God Who made us, Who drew me to him, Who created joy for me in him and him alone—and you have taken it from me before I even held it!"

The cry was terrifying in its anguish. Mary shrank back, feeling as though she had been guilty of some gross, unwitting cruelty. She made her excuse trembling. The universe was tottering. Was not right, right? It must be.

"It was wicked!"

"My God, who are you to judge what is wicked? You who know nothing . . . nothing . . . You who have never felt a man's arms round you—who have never fired the blood of any man—who have no sense of womanhood! You have dared to take him from me, when he had sent for me. I was going to him now, this moment. We were to have left to-night for Italy, and love, and joy: all that I have thirsted for. Oh, God, why was I brought into the world if not to live—to live!"

Passion wracked her; with a moan in which anguish concentrated and grew faint with intensity, Susan Ellestree leant against the mantelpiece, pressing her head down on her arms. She had no dignity; even her anger was overwhelmed by the tide of desolation. He had gone from her life. She knew that he had gone. And with him went life also.

"You would have been wretched afterwards!"

Conviction shook before this depth of anguish. The words faltered forth; they were not heard.

"If I could but have yielded . . . and have died. But to have never felt his mastery. Oh, if I had known I might have held him then . . . and I sent

him away . . . because of my pride! Oh, what is pride? What happiness does it hold? It only hinders. When man calls and Nature cries. 'Obey, he is your mate, the other self for whom you have been lonely since you came into the world, for whom your soul and body starves—obey—obey! Though he leave you, obey! Though he wants you for a moment, obey and thank God that he thirsted for you, thank God you were born to slake his thirst.' "

The wild cry pierced the air. The woman raised her head, her hands outstretched. London, Society, all the mask of civilisation had gone. Primeval woman of the forest and the mountains, stood in an arid desert crying for her mate.

"And I denied him! He would have taken me, and I denied him. I dared to bargain, insisting on more than he, my master, wished to give! I dared to stop to bargain, and so I have got nothing. He throws me off, he uses me to pay his debt to a ghost. Yes, a ghost. You are only that. You have no blood in you. You have only purity! We were not born into the world to keep our chastity; we were born to live and to make live. To create! It is our only end! And when the man comes who should create with us, if we are kept from him, our life is useless. If we are kept from him, we die without our birth-right . . . birth-right!"

The woman collapsed against the wall, her hands fell to her side. Her face stared forward. The words thrilled through the silence.

Mary had leant upon the table; her heart was beating with tragic quickness. She was paralysed by the depth of passion that had been suddenly revealed—raw, elemental, hideous.

For Mrs. Ellestree to feel like that! Mrs. Ellestree—the woman who had preached wisdom to her, the woman whose chief occupation was the dainty

keeping of her beauty. This was a savage woman, lost to all sense of restraint or decency. A woman who was helpless, yet who repelled compassion.

"I thought that I was helping you. I did it because I loved you. I put you before Berryfield's . . . before my trust. I ought to have let Mr. Cuvier help me there. But I put you first. You are so much to me."

The girl had broken down, she was crying piteously. She had lifted her little strength up to help the woman who had helped her, and to whom innumerable ties of love and gratitude still bound her; and she had blundered tragically, bringing the whole world about the woman's head, crushing her, annihilating.

She had felt secure in her own intelligence and judgment, more than all in her perception of right and wrong. Now her beliefs rocked. She was at sea. It seemed to her in this blinding moment that she had never had the right to decide what was good or bad for Susan Ellestree, and a thousand times less right to use the power which chance and circumstance had given her, and take from this woman that for which her soul and body longed.

She had used her power with arrogance. She had arrogated to herself the altering of Susan's destiny. She had made cruel use of Susan's helplessness.

In that instant Mary saw herself as Susan saw, and shrank in horror from the picture.

She was crying in an agony of penitence. The all-conquering Mary was no more. A girl knelt by Mrs. Ellestree, sobbing piteously, longing to comfort, helpless . . . helpless.

Oh, the bitterness of having judged too hardly! Oh, the bitterness of having signed a death-warrant—of realising its irretrievability.

Nothing could undo what she had done. Somehow Mary knew that she had put Cuvier from Mrs. Elles-

tree's life for ever. She had acted, and nothing could undo the act.

Mrs. Ellestree had stood for a long time. It might have been hours or minutes. To Mary the silence had lasted an eternity. She touched the woman's hand tremblingly.

"I did it because I loved you. Oh, believe that!"

"You . . . you—oh, yes!"

Mrs. Ellestree turned heavy eyes on Mary, her face was haggard. Great lines ploughed it from brow to chin. She stared at the girl, only half-comprehending the meaning of her presence.

Everything was blotted out, but the one fact of her desolation.

"Yes, you meant to do right. You did not understand, how should you?"

Even in this moment a sense of justice actuated Mrs. Ellestree; she spoke haltingly.

"I don't know what I have been saying. Did I hurt you? I hope not. I loved you very much once."

"You didn't mean what you said about . . . not living?"

"Living? There is nothing to live for, dear."

The speech came quietly; Mrs. Ellestree still leant against the mantelpiece in complete lassitude. Her look was fixed on space. She was barely conscious; her voice came mechanically.

A sudden terror seized the watcher. She could not see such suffering. She wanted to shut out the sight—to get away from the dull room into which the evening shadows were creeping—out into the fresh air with human life about her.

Scarcely conscious of her own intention, Mary found herself on her feet.

"You are certain I can do nothing?"

"You have done a great deal. Oh, you have shown your power."

With a low cry, Mrs. Ellestree rested her head on her arms. She stood, her shoulders bowed, quite helpless.

So fierce a revulsion seized the girl, she was conscious of nothing but hatred of herself. She must undo the wrong. Let morality go to the four winds of Heaven! Let right go! Susan must drink the draught—and die.

Not die—starving—hungering—unfulfilled!

CHAPTER XXII

"It is so that a woman loves who is worthy of heroes."

R. L. S.

"SHE is going to kill herself."

A white-faced girl stood on the flags of the Inn.

"She is going to kill herself."

Her brain repeated the words mechanically. The thought obliterated everything. The sound of those dreadful sobs was with her still; to her dying day it would stay with her.

She turned her back on the grim building. In a room high up, a woman stood, her head bowed on her arms, great sobs tearing her. She would be there still, neither moving nor hearing, lost to every sense but that of anguish. Or would she be there? Would she be moving, dry-eyed, to . . . to what? Her fruitless life was finished; she had said it.

The girl made a step or two forward; then halted irresolutely. She dare not leave the woman to the fate which threatened. Yet she dared not go back, Susan's tortured cry kept with her. What right had she to hurt any human being as she had hurt Mrs. Ellestree?

She looked at the people hurrying past, each a living centre, radiating and creating life. A touch; and any of those moving bodies might be stilled into eternal silence. She dared not even indirectly be the cause of closing life's door on so bounteous and generous a nature as Susan Ellestree's. No matter what the cost, she must release Cuvier from his promise.

Dimly Mary was beginning to realise that no man may judge his fellows; no man may use the force of circumstances to coerce them into the ways that he thinks well for them to travel.

The Law Courts' clock clanged through the air. Mary counted the strokes with a shock. It was seven o'clock. She must hurry to Cuvier's office, if she would find him.

A premonition of failure accompanied her on her journey: it was accurate. When she reached his office the last clerk was going. Mr. Cuvier had left; gone out of town; the only person who knew his whereabouts would be Mr. Cobb. She got into the cab again and gave the address which had been furnished. A chill wind was springing up, wet with rain. The drops came in her face as the hansom sped onwards.

Shaftsbury Avenue gleamed in the lamp-light. She ascended the cheerless flight of stairs to meet a caretaker upon the landing. It was Mr. Cobb's nightly custom to go out for his dinner. She admitted Mary grudgingly.

The clock chimed eight as Mary entered the small sitting-room. Her breath came quickly; she felt an unpleasant sense of intrusion coming like this, uninvited and unexpected, into Cobb's private domicile. As she looked around her, the feeling grew. The room was so characteristic. In it, it was plain, were all his household gods; his father's sword slung across the mantelpiece, one side of the room well lined with books—sober-looking volumes for the most part—his slippers sprawling on the hearth-rug, his pipe upon the mantelpiece.

There were no flowers, photographs, pictures. It was the room of a lonely man.

The clock ticked on: nine sounded. Mary was faint from want of food. Half-past, and still she waited. The fingers neared the hour. She heard the

click of the latch-key, some one was taking off his overcoat in the outer hall; then Hayden Cobb confronted his amazed visitor.

Mary's cheeks flamed. Suddenly, self-consciousness rushed over her. She was alone in a bachelor's flat at ten of the night, alone with a strange young man who was embarrassed by her presence—worse, resented it. It seemed as if she were eternally pursuing Cobb.

She found her voice with difficulty. "I have come for Mr. Cuvier's address. I went to the office, they told me you would have it."

"Why didn't they telephone up to his house?"

The harsh common-sense of the query made her cheeks burn more hotly.

"They didn't think, nor did I. It was so important I had to come and wait . . ."

"Have you been here long?"

"I don't know. I started for the office at seven and came straight here."

"Haven't you had any dinner?"

"No. I suppose not. Please give me Mr. Cuvier's address."

"I'm afraid I can't."

"They said you would know."

Cobb's mouth shut inexorably. "I know right enough."

"But you won't tell me."

Mary's patience was becoming exhausted. The long wait had preyed upon her powers of endurance and she was faint for the want of food. Cobb's immovability oppressed her with a sense of physical fatigue. She felt she could scarcely trouble to argue with him.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Mr. Cuvier left orders I was to give no one his address."

"But I must have it. He would be the first to say I must. He will never forgive you if you don't give it to me."

Despair shot up a last illuminating flame.

Mr. Cobb put his hands in his pockets and surveyed the carpet.

"You are not going to?"

"No. He's gone away for a complete rest. I can't let him be annoyed by any one."

Mary took a deep breath; then she approached the table, and stood behind it looking at her companion. She did not feel she could take Cobb into her confidence; his brusque reserve repelled sympathy. Yet she must impress her need upon him.

"If I do not get his address from you and send to him to-night, a woman may kill herself!"

The statement did not produce the desired effect; to be strictly accurate, it produced no effect at all. Cobb's experience as Mr. Cuvier's secretary had led him to a cynical appraisal of such threats.

He continued his survey of the carpet without response. He did not like Mary being mixed up with one of Cuvier's unsavoury "affairs."

He had not forgiven her for her appearance of sympathy and subsequent betrayal; the memory of it closed his heart to her. He did not feel a very active resentment; he expected too little from the world. But Mary's revelations had torn his romance from the roots. The girl whom he had pitied for her loneliness, for whom he had longed to make a home and to take care of, was the head of Berryfield's, an astute, keen, business woman, who had availed herself of his belief to benefit her firm. He believed she had been actuated by pride in the honour of that firm, but that did not make his mistake the less bitter, nor his loss the less poignant.

The friendless girl had begun to occupy a very important part in his life. She had gone, and in her

place a capable, hard-headed, rich and powerful young woman, her purpose achieved, turned indifferent eyes upon him.

The worst of it was that he could not entirely overcome the feeling of protection which Mary had inspired in him. Her appealing eyes made his heart prick foolishly. He was conscious of an absurd longing to put her into the big arm-chair and send out for some dinner for her.

The purport of her visit was irrelevant. The point was that she was there in his own room, and had had no dinner. What would she say if he came over to her and took her in his arms, and . . .

"Why don't you answer me? Did you hear what I said? It is a matter of life or death. She will kill herself."

A heavy wave of hair was parted on one side, boyishly: it hung over her brow in a weary fashion. She had raised her hand and was pushing it back, showing the white forehead. He loved the trick.

"What is the matter with you? You don't seem as if you're listening." She slipped past the table and stood close up to him, looking into his face with burning intensity. "She will kill herself. Do you understand that?"

"Oh, no, she won't."

He had to pull himself together now. Mary was not a yard from him; he almost touched her. A step forward and the serious anguished little face would be hidden against his shoulder, while his arms closed round her, never to let her go again, Berryfield's or not. She was here at his mercy. Outside, the world might part them; in his rooms she was powerless.

"What do you say that for?"

"I don't know what I'm saying." Cobb's voice came hoarsely. He turned round with a wrench and threw the window open.

"But you are mad . . . mad . . . mad!" Mary's gaze sought the rigid figure desperately. "Oh, what shall I do? I must get at Mr. Cuvier. Listen, *please!* It is for Mrs. Ellestree. They were going away together. I asked Mr. Cuvier to give her up in payment for my help: he agreed. I had no right to interfere. She will kill herself! Do you hear? If we cannot find him she will kill herself, and it will be I who will have done it."

The air had cooled Cobb's fevered brain. The grief in the girl's voice pierced through to his comprehension. He turned, again himself.

"What do you want to do? Send for Mr. Cuvier?"

"Yes."

"To come back to her?"

"Yes. Oh, I know what you are thinking. I can't help it. I haven't the right to take her life."

"I haven't the right to worry Mr. Cuvier. I'm sorry to have to seem brutal, but it isn't the first time, unfortunately, that I have been approached for his address—for the same purpose—with the same threat. Mr. Cuvier trusts me not to give it."

"But . . . for Mrs. *Ellestree!*"

Cobb tightened his lips somewhat uneasily. He did not like to tell Mary there had been women whose claims on Cuvier had been far more imperative.

"You will not?"

Mary read his answer in his eyes. She did not attempt further protest: she turned away too sick at heart to combat further.

"Where are you going now?"

"I don't know."

"You must know."

Mary rested against the door, her eyes met his blankly. She did not know. She had failed to reach Cuvier.

"To Mrs. Ellestree?"

"She wouldn't have me."

"To the hotel, then?"

"I don't know."

Cobb's anger melted. Now at least business schemes did not actuate her. She was only a terrified girl, face to face with life's most tragic problems, lamentably unable to master them.

"Is Mrs. Ellestree alone?"

"Yes."

"You say she is very cut up?"

"She is going to kill herself."

"Oh, nonsense. They all say that. Really I've heard women say that, with far more reason than Mrs. Ellestree; women who have gone away with Mr. Cuvier, and whom he's left—and they're all alive, every one of them. Don't you worry about Mrs. Ellestree."

"You don't know her. She's not like wicked women. If anything dreadful happens, I, and only I, shall be the cause!"

"That's absurd. It isn't fair to load a girl with such responsibility. Mrs. Ellestree ought to be able to take care of herself. You acted rightly and she'll thank you for it when she's calmer."

"If she lives."

"Hasn't she any friends beside you?"

"There's Miss Benton . . ."

"Good. She's staying at the 'Cecil.' I saw her name in their visitors' book to-day. Come along. We'll get down there and send her to take care of Mrs. Ellestree. It isn't work for you. You wouldn't let me take you to have some supper first?"

"Oh, no . . . no . . . let's find Rosalys. You are certain you couldn't send to Mr. Cuvier?"

Cobb had to resist another frantic inclination to seize the helpless little figure and shut out the torturing responsibilities. He rammed his hands into his pockets and spoke resolutely.

"You'd be sorry if I told you, believe me. If you can only stand firm through this, you'll come out on

top with Mrs. Ellestree. Besides, I stand for Mr. Cuvier. How do you think I feel about him? Do you think it doesn't hurt me? When I can I keep these women from him. He's gone off now to pull himself together, so that he can come back clear-headed and with all his strength to launch that process on the market. I'm not going to lift a finger to embroil him in another miserable entanglement, not for any woman's sake, even yours. It does him no good: and it most certainly does no one else any good. But I'd like to help you, and if you'd feel easier in your mind if Mrs. Ellestree had some one with her, I'll take you to the 'Cecil' right away."

"All right, then."

Mary was too tired to maintain her independence. She turned instinctively to Hayden Cobb's protecting shelter: his plain hard sense was a relief after strenuous emotion. At the sound of his voice life took on its normal perspective. She no longer trembled on the verge of dizzying, engulfing precipices.

They spoke little as they speeded to the 'Cecil.' Mrs. Ellestree's peril usurped all considerations in Mary's mind. Cobb had enough to do to fight back the instinct which drew him irresistibly to Mary. This afternoon both would have sworn it was impossible that they could ever meet on friendly terms again, and yet here they sat in the same hansom, not only actuated by a common interest, but in their old relationship. Yet an immeasurable gulf stretched between them now. Mary was the head of Berryfield's, and he was bound by every tie of allegiance to her rival. All his strength and energies must be devoted to Cuvier's service, and directed against the girl whom his heart longed to cherish and protect. It was not an easy situation; a very difficult one for a loyal person, when the girl he loved leaned beside him—tired, over-wrought and lonely.

Cobb felt relief when the cab drew up in the hotel courtyard.

His fortitude was to be tried still further. Rosalys was in, and full of ready sympathy. She accompanied them forthwith to Clement's Inn; there they discovered an empty flat. Mrs. Ellestree had gone. Her boxes stood packed and corded. She must have walked out in the things she stood up in; nothing had been taken.

Even Cobb's composure shook; it was evident that Mary's fears had not been as unfounded as he had imagined. Yet he refused to give Cuvier's address: Cuvier could do nothing, and even if he could, he had left Cobb to keep his place of retreat guarded. Though it was Mary who pleaded, Cobb would not let his personal feelings over-ride his responsibility to Cuvier. This time there should be no entry through his guard.

Yet his sense of duty was to be rewarded. As they reached Mary's hotel, she broke the silence generously. The sight of the stern young profile beside her moved her to understanding. She also served hard masters.

"I do not bear you any ill-will for not telling me. I see that you are right to think of Mr. Cuvier first."

Mary's brows were knit in her attempt to dispense justice; she turned an earnest face to him.

"You are quite right," she repeated. "And it is wonderful of you to have troubled to come with me, after I betrayed your confidence. I can't understand how you can be so kind; even when Mr. Cuvier said those dreadful things, you stood by me."

"I couldn't very well do anything else. A man doesn't reproach a woman when he's fallen through his own weakness. I had no business to tell you Mr. Cuvier's secrets. It wasn't your fault, you were naturally keen on setting Berryfield's right."

"But you don't think I pretended to be sorry for you?" Mary questioned passionately.

Cobb shut his lips in his usual restrained manner.

"You don't think I was trying to trick you into letting out things?"

"I'm sure you didn't think of it in that way. I don't think you thought at all."

"No," Mary acquiesced miserably. "I suppose I didn't. Yes, I did, though. I knew you wouldn't tell me a word if you knew who I was. You wouldn't have let me help Mr. Cuvier because I'm a woman—would you?"

"Men don't usually take help from women in business matters," said Cobb. His heart was sore at the memory of other confessions than purely business ones.

"I suppose you will never believe I really cared for *your* troubles."

"Oh, I don't matter."

"It's so difficult to say . . . that . . . you do."

Honesty is a dangerous companion. Mary had raised her eyes to Cobb's. There was such desperate appeal in them that a stronger head than Cobb's might easily have lost its balance. Before he could control himself he had answered.

"Do you mean that? Do you mean you really care? No! Don't answer. Because whatever you felt, I could never be free to ask you that. You know I'm bound to stay with Cuvier. And . . . as I must work for him . . . I mustn't see you again."

"I thought business wasn't to come . . . between us," Mary ventured wildly. In that moment she had realised all that Cobb meant to her. His friendship, she told herself his friendship . . . that was all she wanted. To feel he was in the world, that she knew some one cared for her, some one in whom she trusted, whom she could look up to as she had looked up to Mr. Berryfield. So the flag of her pride came

quivering down and she made her last bid without it.

If it had been difficult to resist before it was one thousand times harder now. Hayden Cobb nerved himself for the last struggle.

"Stop! . . ." he turned to Mary; his hand closed on hers.

"I didn't know then," said he. "You're Berryfield's. I'm against you. Business can't be put out of our lives now. I'm on Cuvier's side and I mustn't see you again—ever—for when I'm with you I don't know what I'm doing. You make me weak. It isn't fair to Mr. Cuvier, and I owe him everything. You don't know what I feel like—to think of you going back alone to fight us, especially now . . . I can't bear to think of what you're up against. But I'm not free. If I were . . . well, I expect you know where I'd be. And if you ever want anything done that I *can* do, anything that I'm free to do, it will be the only pleasure I can have now, if you'll let me do it. I shan't have any happiness in our success, and yet you see that I must only work for that, don't you?"

Their eyes met. Then Mary raised her face, a wonderful smile upon it. Bravely, fearlessly, she looked up at him.

"I'm so glad," she said, "so glad you're like that. Do you think I wouldn't rather look up to you and honour you, even if I have to be alone? I don't mind telling you now that I look up to you. But I can go back, it makes me brave to know you care: it makes me happy. I shan't be lonely even if I never see you again."

Cobb did not answer; he was looking at her with a look that a woman should be proud to see in the eyes of any man, and most of all in the eyes of the man who loves her.

There is greater love than the love whose name is passion. It is the love which frees; not the love

which captures, for of the things which make up this love, the first is trust, then come pride, belief, ambition, ringing to the muster-roll. Pride, belief, ambition—for the other as for one's self. And yet a love which blots out all the world, which is strong as the most brutish passion, and which, denied, racks and tears as keenly as the worst abandonment. Only such lovers face the torture, standing with unflinching eyes and lips that smile.

Cobb answered with queer inconsequence.

"I knew it directly I saw you," he said.

The cab rattled into the street where Mary's hotel was situated.

"You promise me you'll have some dinner. Can you get something now? It's nearly twelve."

"Yes, I will. I promise."

"And you'll take care of yourself, because I want you to. You'll think of that?"

"Yes."

"And . . . you might send me a line now and then to say how you are."

"I'd rather not, if you don't mind."

"Why not?" Cobb's hand closed over hers.

"Because . . . to tell you the truth . . . it will be quite difficult enough without . . . being reminded."

The bravest hearts may break down occasionally.

Mary pushed open the door as the cab stopped with a rattle and a jangle at the steps of her hotel.

"Don't come, please."

The slight figure ran up the steps and vanished into the hotel.

"Where to, sir?"

Cobb gave the direction mechanically.

CHAPTER XXIII

"Love's wine: 'tis but the dregs I quaff."

FREDERICK FENN, *Amasis*.

THE artistic temperament is not prone to consider the convenience of other people. Ferroll possessed his full share of this quality. Conditions must always be arranged to suit circumstances. He had reduced the art of environment to a positive science, so much importance did he attach to the effect of atmosphere upon the emotions. This did not denote insincerity, but merely that he possessed the happy gift of being able to retire from his sentient self, and view it impersonally.

Consequently, when he anticipated great moments in his life, he took steps to give them their fair chance of romance.

Rosalys had sent to him at once, and they had spent a frantic week searching for his sister, but in vain. Mary had returned to Birmingham; he had received a formal note, giving him her address in case he had news of Mrs. Ellestree.

It had chilled him momentarily: as the days went on Mary's strong and austere purity became more and more precious beside the easy endearments of Rosalys. In the flood of emotionalism which surrounded her and her *fiancé*, he turned to the thought of Mary's self-control. Her straightforward serious eyes called to all that was best in him.

That she possessed riches and importance did not trouble him. It was the woman only who filled his

vision; her circumstances might lend additional piquancy to her independence, but they did not affect his point of view. He had been powerfully attracted by her personality at first sight, and the attraction grew instead of fading; she represented his ideals for himself, rather than his ideals for womanhood. He hungered for self-control and unflinching strength!

He did not concern himself about her happiness or welfare, she only possessed interest in proportion to her effect on his life. Removed from it, he was conscious of deprivation. From missing her, he fell to wanting; from wanting, he felt he needed her. His mind being made up on this point, the next step with Ferroll was to supply his need. He did not feel his promise to Susan restricted him now that he was in earnest. He knew that Mary was the stronger of the two; she must help him to fulfil his highest possibilities. As for practical matters, Mary had money: the drag of poverty would not be theirs. Further than that, Ferroll cared little. Money was an absolute incident to him. His tastes were extremely simple: as long as he was fed and clothed, and in a sympathetic atmosphere, the outer trappings of "position" did not interest him. Personality was the only thing that counted in his calculations. He found Mary's needful for his development.

But he knew where his difficulty lay. It would be hard to convince her of his sincerity.

Besides, the mystery surrounding Susan made pursuit of any other object seem indecent. The strain told on him in spite of his prediction to his sister. The Susan he had known had changed so confusingly. It was so extraordinary to think of Susan with interests of her own. He had rested safely in her temperate, cheerful wisdom, but that had gone. His theory of a journey was uncomfortably shaken. Could Susan have left the flat without

taking so much as a dressing bag? Unless . . . He could not face the thought.

Yet when the suspense was put an end to, he knew that he had always thought the worst. Complex indeed is the artistic temperament! In all the joy of his relief, he could also see the news as a tool for his endeavour towards Mary.

He wired straightway summoning Mary to the flat. Where they had first met, he must see her to tell her the glad news of Susan's safety: and then, in the softened mood which relief must bring to her, he would tell her of his need and win her for his own.

Unfortunately one may arrange circumstances, but it is more difficult to govern moods.

Directly Mary entered, he felt an infinitesimal chill. She wore a dark serge frock which gave her a severe appearance, and there was a business-like composure in her demeanour which was unpromising. He realised with a touch of dismay that he was no longer facing an unsophisticated *protégée* of Susan's.

Her reply to his tender greeting struck coldly.

"Of course I came, as the news was too bad to wire. I should like to hear everything, though. Don't spare me, please."

She had sat down mechanically; her hands were folded in her lap. She looked up at him, white-faced and calm. Only her eyes showed how she was suffering.

Ferroll's panoply of preparation seemed suddenly absurd—worse than absurd, wilfully cruel. He held out a letter quickly.

"It's from her. She's with Tom. She wants us to send her things."

"From her?"

Mary held the letter, staring up at Ferroll: then her eyes travelled over it.

"So she is in America?"

"Yes. Did you ever hear such madness? Crossed

to America with nothing but what she bought at Liverpool! Why?"

"She says why. She felt she couldn't see any of us again."

"But that doesn't account for her taking none of her boxes, especially as they were all packed."

"I think it is quite easily explained. She didn't think at all. She only wanted to get away."

Mary folded up the letter, her mouth was pursed up rather curiously.

"It's a tremendous relief, anyhow!"

"Exactly. I am wondering why you didn't wire. I can't quite see the point of bringing me all this way, when you might have let me know hours sooner by a perfectly simple method."

Ferroll was determinedly romantic. Mary's matter-of-fact, but unfortunately obvious, remark might have suppressed a less virile ardour. Her coldness spurred him on, however. The difficulties which were rising up gave him the required incentive.

"I had to see you, and I wanted to see you here."

"Here?"

"Yes: here where we first met. Do you remember?"

Ferroll's gaze was fixed on Mary in eager tenderness. This composure was only an affectation: his desire must thrill her. Now that she was with him, his soul craved for the stimulant of her belief. Yes: he needed her: he was sure of himself.

"Of course I remember." Mary was looking at her watch. "I believe I can catch the 4.15. That means I must leave here in a quarter of an hour."

"Good heavens! don't talk of trains!" Ferroll broke out in a burst of petulance which made him smile himself. "I know I'm a fool, but you don't know how it maddens me to see you sitting there as if—as if you'd got a typewriter in front of you. Be human, there's a darling! Come." Ferroll had deposited himself ingratiatingly on the arm of her chair.

"Unfortunately, I must think of mundane things like trains; you certainly won't do it for me." Mary could not resist a smile even in her soreness. There was something irresistible in Ferroll's supreme egotism. He no longer held her captive, but she recognised his fascination. He was so trusting.

"Except to keep you from them. Mary, dear, I've been thinking things over, and for the first time in my life I'm sure of myself. You can trust me now, you can, really. I need you more than I need any one in the world, even Susan. Will you risk it?"

We have indicated that Ferroll had not met with many rebuffs in the course of a highly undeserving, but singularly fortunate, career. Now that he had arrived at a decision, that for Mary's companionship, it was worth abandoning his freedom, so much as an idea that she might not appreciate his sacrifice had never come into his mind.

He had always won his desires, when he had pursued them. His better nature often held him back; more often than people gave him credit for, but he was not stopped by the chance of failure.

Mary's response came as a thunderbolt.

"Risk *marrying* you?"

The amazement in the question was not at Ferroll's magnanimity.

"Don't you believe in me, Mary? You must! I'm in earnest. I've thought it all out. I love you for the best there is in you. I love you because you're strong, and dependable, and good. It would be worth while being faithful to you, and if now and then I lapse—you'd understand how small the lapse was, and how little it affected my love for you. I wouldn't ask you to trust yourself if I wasn't sure."

Mary put her hand up to her head: was she indeed awake and on firm earth? Could Ferroll be saying such words, with every sign of honesty? Ferroll, who had gone from her with an appointment

on his lips, and kissed Rosalys ten minutes after! And he was talking about being "faithful!"

Trust herself to Ferroll! the sport of every breeze, well-intentioned, idealistic, but fitful as the wind! Contrast was inevitable. The memory of another dominance rushed back to her: a dominance which sheltered and upheld.

One cannot enjoy unlimited irresponsibility without paying for it. Ferroll was to pay now when he offered his manhood to the only woman he had ever wanted for his own, and she found the gift worthless.

"I am burdened with responsibilities," said Mary. "I could only love some one who would help me to carry them: some one not only in whose loyalty I could trust, but who would want to help me, and to take care of me. It has never occurred to you or Mrs. Ellestree to think of me as a person who is tied with duties, and has an object of her own in life. I know I am of insignificant account as a woman: it is very good of you to have cared for me, but a heavy burden rests on me, and there is only me to carry it. I couldn't contract any other tie which would hinder me in the performance of my duties, and besides . . . besides . . . oh, I want to be taken care of! I'm tired of carrying responsibilities! You only offer me another one."

Ferroll had upheld woman's right to an independent individuality. It was now his privilege to behold that right in practice. It must be confessed that the first sensation was not one of pleasure. It must be also told, however, that amazement sent him reeling into the regions of impersonality, whence he took a startled view of himself and Mary, and realised with astonishment that was not untouched by shame, that Mary's view was not inhuman, but a perfectly reasonable one. Ferroll's was a very complex nature, responding in an extraordinary degree to his sur-

roundings. In Mary's presence, he became just and rational, his quick brain saw more deeply than its wont: he was never vain, but his self-confidence drew into more normal limits.

Mary had struck him hard: he met the blow with stunned amazement. Then as consciousness slowly travelled back to him, he found himself surveying the matter philosophically.

Ferroll and Susan were curiously alike in the component parts of their being, only they responded to different notes. Ferroll's emotion sounded easily: his philosophy lay deep. Susan had more control of her emotions: her philosophy was for daily use—her philosophy which a sudden trust had bankrupted. Ferroll's withstood the onslaught.

He had been petted into seeming weakness: the soul within was strong. Now that he realised the desire of his spiritual, as well as his emotional nature was to be withheld, he met the blow with singular sweetness.

He stood up from the chair, and moved a pace or two away. His life passed in a review before him. He tried to consider it from Mary's point of view, the citizen, with her stake firmly planted, her ideals plainly printed, and her ambitions definite. Regarded in that light, he must appear an aimless vagabond of no fixed course or tenure—unstable, worthless.

And yet—there was the other side. He knew how to enjoy something finer than the merely sensuous side of life; he held a passport to most people's souls, he felt the brotherhood of humanity. He passed from one calling to another with an open heart, giving and receiving. A vagabond perhaps, but one who had learnt the art of living. Circumstances and temperament combined to separate him from Mary: but in that moment of supreme illumination, Ferroll knew that a woman might be strong and pure, and yet find in him her complement. Only

she must come with him: he could never be locked up in one small round of interests, even for the woman whom he loved.

Mary was right, he would fail her, he could be no help to her: but it was not that he was wanting, only that he swayed to another rhythm.

He turned to her without a trace of bitterness.

"You are quite right," he said. "But you are right because you are not in love with me. It's rather hard to explain, but if you had been in love, I could have taken care of you! As it is . . . I see the sense of all you say. It's funny how one may come so near to happiness and miss it. Sue and I have each met the one person who could have completed us and held us: and in each case, circumstances have stood round that person, and forbidden us to do more than come near and look . . . and realise. Well, don't worry. How you worry! Do you know you have grown ten years older since I saw you. I can't think now how I ever dreamed that I had only to put out my hand to take you. You are a woman wrapped up in your own life: and I am miles away . . . outside."

"Yes," said Mary dully: she rose, something stopped utterance. She too had had a glimpse of heaven: a heaven that in its turn was barred by circumstances.

Something in her face sent a pang of jealousy, quick, living, pulsing through the man who watched her. Some instinct cried out the reason of her lack of response. She had shown no joy or pity; she had been positively uninterested. With Ferroll to guess was to speak.

"There's some one else!"

Sharp, jealous, the question took her by surprise. She turned upon him breathless, ready to defend her secret; and behold, it lay before him.

"Who is it? Some one responsible and business-

like? Who could it be? I know! The man who took you round to Rosalys. She told me he seemed to be a great friend . . . to be looking after you. Tell me; you ought to tell me!"

"There is nothing to tell."

"You're not in love with him?"

Mary's face betrayed her.

"You're engaged."

"No. No." Outraged maidenhood spoke passionately.

"But you're going to be?"

"Never. I can't. He can't. He's Mr. Cuvier's secretary. He can't leave Mr. Cuvier. He owes everything to him!"

"And you love each other?"

"Oh, I don't know!" The words came with a little sob. "I'm not free to think of such things."

"We can't help feeling things, unfortunately. So you're in love with some one else? I thought I was taking it standing: but this has bowled me over. Some one else! One can see things reasonably enough, as long as it's only circumstances that interfere. But some one else! You care for some one else. That's so inexorable. One feels off the canvas. I'm paid out now for the way I've fooled with people. I'm ready to give up things to a woman, and she doesn't want me. She wants some one else. There's a grim humour about it, isn't there? A horribly amusing justice . . . What an egotistic brute I am! There you are, prisoned in your manufactory, in love with a man who loves you, and is prisoned in Cuvier's office. You poor little girl! And you have to fight it out alone. I say, try and forget my rotten selfishness. We were great friends once upon a time. I'd like you to feel I still am that."

"You're very kind," said Mary, with a foolish little catch. "Only . . . there's no room for friendship. I mustn't want friends. I'm back at business and I've

had my holiday. Oh, Ferroll, I don't know why we're put in the world. There's such a lot of work to be done, and such a long time to be spent in doing it. I wish God had started us with a blessing instead of a curse!" Humour lurked in her despair: she and Ferroll looked at one another and felt odd kinship. Launched in the sea of life's complexity, they could still survey it, hurt, but struggling to keep a foothold on their rafts of mastery. Drenched with the spray, bruised and stunned they could send a wintry smile at one another!

"They're interchangeable," said Ferroll queerly. "Love, for instance! Well, I'm glad we've had this talk; we've straightened things out a bit. I say, why did you hide from me that evening?"

Mary coloured slowly, then her eyes met Ferroll's.

"I saw you kiss Rosalys."

"Good Heavens!" Ferroll glanced up at the ceiling with a despair that was half-real. "And you could never understand . . . could you . . . that it didn't matter . . . not one iota? Yet you were jealous!" His eyes gleamed with pure delight. "That's something. Come! Life's not such an unrelieved performance. You minded?"

"I was disgusted." The speech came shortly. Mary was advancing to the door.

Ferroll, adventurer and vagabond, barred the way. He put his hand on her shoulders, looking down at her.

"You minded, Mary! Ah, be honest! It's hard to give you up. I loved you more than you could possibly imagine! Think! I offered to give up my freedom, my golden glancing freedom. I would have laid it in your firm little hands to have and to hold, for better, for worse. I'm no great catch, but such as I am, I offered myself to you. Dear, it has been a pretty big blow to find you don't want me. It's the devil's own bitterness to see the love in your eyes for

some one else. Take the sting out of it, Mary. Say you minded about Rosalys! That there have been moments when I've called to you and your heart followed: and for the sake of the talks we've had, and the dreams we've dreamed, and the understanding—it has been understanding, hasn't it?—and because I haven't lied to you . . . oh, Mary, look at me! Let the look in your eyes be 'yes.'"

There were few women in the world who would have withstood the pleading tones, sad with untold bitterness, yet laughing through the sorrow with Pan's own torturing enchantment: yet Mary raised her eyes, and they were grave and clear.

"I have nothing to give you because there is nothing left to give. All my love . . . all . . . all of it . . . belongs to the some one else, and because I trust him, he must be able to look me in the eyes and know his trust is safe with me . . . if we ever meet."

Ferroll's grasp relaxed: he held open the door for her without a word. She ran down the stairs quickly; for the first time she felt pity. The mother in her yearned to comfort the boy who had looked on her as Ferroll had.

All the way to the train, the memory stayed with her. If Ferroll could have known it, he had never been so dear to her. Only . . . Cobb trusted her!

There are various ways in taking a defeat: there is despair: there is resignation: and there is a flashing splendid heroism.

For the first time in his life, Fortune had closed the door on Ferroll; he did not proceed to batter at it. For a moment his love was lifted above the craving of egotism: he wanted to do something wonderful: something that would be anguished and heroic.

One of the mad deeds of abnegation which are a relief through the keenness of the pain they bring,

flashed into his head. He would go to the man whom Mary loved and bring him to her.

A fool's errand, but one which set the quick blood leaping in Ferroll's impressionable heart. He longed to immolate himself: to take the loneliness from Mary's eyes and see her happy. To place her with the man she trusted, and leave her for ever.

Such thoughts were with him as he set his face towards Cuvier's office.

Cobb was in. In a few minutes Ferroll was ushered into his room, and almost before the office-boy departed, realised that he stood before a man with whom Mary would be ideally happy! A man also with whom he would have never a thought in common to his dying day.

It is difficult to walk into an office and begin an intimately personal conversation without a decent overture of preliminary fact. Ferroll had an aptitude for arranging facts. He availed himself of his gift with graceful promptitude.

"I believe you know Miss van Heyten?"

Yes. Mr. Cobb did know Miss van Heyten. To judge from the quick glance he gave Ferroll, he was intensely interested in Miss van Heyten.

Ferroll allowed his straw hat to revolve gently in his hand, and spoke with studied accuracy.

"I am sure Miss van Heyten would wish Mr. Cuvier to know that we have heard from my sister, Mrs. Ellestree. So as I was passing I looked in. She is with her husband in America."

"America!"

"Yes. It seems he sent for her to join him, quite unexpectedly. My sister has always longed to see America, and as the boat was leaving she decided to go straight off instead of being held up for another week. Of course Mary worried as she knew nothing of the telegram. My sister is very impulsive." Ferroll smiled in a paternally affectionate fashion.

Then his gaze encountered Cobb's and his face stiffened. Cobb was looking down before him in the polite manner one assumes when one accepts a foolish statement through a regard for the other person's feelings.

Ferroll had to grip hold of himself to keep down his anger. He spoke abruptly.

"You're a friend of Miss van Heyten's I believe . . ."

"I hope so."

The two men levelled glances, mutually antagonistic. Ferroll's soul was aching to hurt the stern young Stoic who—alas for Ferroll's vanity!—had caused that look in Mary's eyes.

"Is Miss van Heyten in town?"

"Yes. I've just left her at the station. She's going back to Birmingham."

"Indeed . . .?"

Cobb placed a pile of papers on one side with care. He was furiously jealous of this handsome, winning person who had taken his place with Mary; he distrusted his musical voice, his careless grace, the devil-may-care fire which lit his eyes; most of all, he hated the semi-patronising air with which Ferroll spoke to him. Cobb was not an easy person to patronise.

Ferroll felt and resented the ill-concealed enmity: had he not come on an errand of quite magnificent self-sacrifice? He felt he was rising to unexpected heights. His judgment told him this man would make Mary happy. His too facile instinct jumped to the conclusion that his and Mary's pride stood in their way. Wherefore Ferroll obeyed the dramatic promptings of his temperament. He plunged abruptly. If he sat there much longer, Cobb's attitude would make him too indignant to perform the act of immolation.

"I'm worried about Miss van Heyten," he said.

Cobb made no comment. Ferroll felt an insane irritation. Here he was, ready to hand over the woman he loved, and the dolt opposite sat like a graven image!

Ferroll took a short breath and spoke again. His speech had lost its usual self-possession.

"The business is too big for a girl to manage by herself. She's all alone; she ought to have some one who can share her responsibility."

"Hasn't she a solicitor?" Cobb's voice was brutally sensible.

Ferroll's eyes gleamed.

"I believe there is a person of the name of Humphry, a fat, smug, self-satisfied old devil whom you would call a business man," said Ferroll with deadly quiet. "But women occasionally want human intercourse. It struck me Miss van Heyten did. It also struck me that she was unhappy. The idea occurred to me that she might have met some one up here in London. Knowing her—as I think—misplaced idea of solidity, it struck me that she might be fretting for some one who was too big a fool to see his chance, or too pig-headed to take it. That's only my idea, of course. I'm mentioning it, because if the lump of reliability who could manage such a business and take the cares off Miss van Heyten's shoulders doesn't see his opportunity and take it, I may go in and win myself. That's all."

The two men sat for a moment glaring at each other. Cobb's composure had vanished equally with his companion's. When he spoke his voice was husky.

"I pity any woman who depends on you."

"So do I. That's why I'm telling you."

Ferroll's answers were generally disconcerting. Cobb stared, dumfounded. Ferroll pushed his chair back with a chafing motion.

"If I didn't know I'd make her wretched, d'you

think I'd be sitting here? If I didn't know you're the domestic, business type, d'you think I'd waste time piercing your thick head? It's because I care so much, I'm bothering. It's not for you, you fool."

Ferroll's passion had overstepped the bounds of candour. His hate of Cobb shot through his words. If at any time in the conversation Cobb had been favourably affected by Ferroll's frankness, the last speech effectually stopped the process.

Cobb rose up with dignity. He resembled Cuvier in that moment. Ferroll, conscious of his folly, nervous, twitching with impatience, essayed to control himself.

"Hang it all, you can't expect me to like telling you."

Cobb lifted his erect young head, and looked over Ferroll in undisguised contempt.

"I'd leave people to manage their own affairs if I were you," said he, slowly. "I don't know that this emotional business ever does any good to any one. Perhaps women like it. But don't try it on with men. They won't stand it. And as for Miss van Heyten . . ." He paused a moment, then spoke very slowly: "I don't follow any girl till I'm in a position to look after her. And when I'm in that position it is for me to decide. In the meantime, I'd leave Miss van Heyten to take care of herself, if I were you. She's able to."

"Quite able to!"

Ferroll's face was livid. For a moment he felt like striking Cobb. Then a passion of mortification rushed over him. He had hurt Mary's cause by his meddling. He had lowered her, offered her jealous secret to this dolt's indifference. He spoke fiercely.

"I may be mistaken. I'd give my life to see her happy. I believe that I could make her happy."

Cobb's face changed.

"That's for you and her to say," said he. "D'you mind if we don't discuss this any further?"

Somewhere behind them a door creaked; neither heard. The sound of battle was too loud in their ears.

Ferroll stood in a frenzy of impotence, he knew he had roused Cobb's jealousy, even distrust of Mary; knew too with what little cause. He made a desperate sally.

"I'm not discussing anything. I came here to tell you she's leading a hell of a life, struggling with that devil's business down in Birmingham. I thought if you'd got a man's heart in you, you'd go to her. Good God! Do you think I'd have come idly? For the sake of interference? Do you know she's just refused me? I thought there was a blind chance that you didn't know how she felt to you."

"Yes, I know. She knows how I feel to her. She knows also that I'm tied here. I can't go to her. She knows I can't. We don't want any one's advice or help. I don't know how Miss van Heyten feels, but I regard it as impertinence."

"Thanks. That's very generous of you."

"No. It's not generous. I don't feel generous. What d'you think I feel like . . . to have you come and tell me that she's struggling there against such odds . . . I know the odds . . . and know that I can't go! Worse! That I've to fight against her! You can't do anything. No one can. As long as Mr. Cuvier's alive, I serve him!"

The door closed gently: Ferroll turned his head unconsciously. The door was opening with a rattle.

"Hullo, Ferroll!"

"Oh, you're back."

"Yes, this moment. What are you doing here?"

"I dropped in to impart the news my sister's in America. Tom wired for her. So she went straight off, and never thought of writing till she got there. We've all been rather worried." Ferroll took up his

hat. "I must be going. Good-bye, sir." He hesitated: then turned to Cobb, "Good-bye."

"I'll see you out."

Cobb accompanied him to the passage.

"Good-bye . . . it may have been decent of you to come . . . but . . . it's no good . . . ever . . . interfering with other people's business. If they can't manage it themselves, they're not worth helping."

With which cryptic remark he turned his back on Ferroll and returned into his office.

Cuvier was still there. He was sitting at Cobb's desk, glancing through the papers.

"The report of the test is in. Miss van Heyten was quite right. The patent's come out on top."

"I'm glad."

"Yes. Now we shall have to look alive."

"Yes, sir. By the way . . . Miss van Heyten called the day you went. She wanted your address . . . for Mrs. Ellestree. You told me not to give it to any one."

Cuvier looked at the boy, somewhat whimsically. Then he rose with a sheaf of papers collected in his hand: the characteristic smile hovered round the corners of his mouth.

"You're a good watch-dog, Cobb," said he. "Come and take some letters."

CHAPTER XXIV

"For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end."

BROWNING, *Prospice*.

BIRMINGHAM does not strike the stranger favourably: its citizens see it in a glorifying mist of endeavour and ideals. They regard it as the metropolis of the Midlands; and to those who tread them, its busy thoroughfares are paved with the gold of civic patriotism. To the cosmopolitan outsider, it appears a grey and strenuous city, hopelessly utilitarian and unbeautiful.

Mr. Cuvier's gaze rested on its principal street with cynical amusement. This bustling city with its narrow arteries had created Mary. She was a typical product.

He passed down New Street with his easy sauntering stride, then turned into the by-street where the offices of Berryfield's were situated. His eyes were screwed up in a little twinkle. The part of the benevolent good fairy was not over-familiar. Nor an easy one, to judge from the somewhat doubtful expression that entered into the twinkle as he waited in the outer office.

Mary had no intimation of his coming. She was dictating letters when Mr. Cuvier's card was brought. The clerk waited in the doorway till she had finished the letter she was engaged on. Her staff knew better than to disturb the "boss" when she was working out a train of thought.

The letter finished, she gave a nod, and the clerk

approached. She put down the card with a somewhat heightened colour. Cuvier's name brought many recollections with it. What could he want with her? She was interested and stimulated at the thought of seeing him.

When Cuvier entered, she rose to meet him. He stood in her domain and she gave him welcome. She was no longer afraid of him. She did not even disapprove of him; he had kept his word, and Mrs. Ellestree was saved. They met as combatants meet in an armistice, pausing from the struggle to shake hands.

Cuvier realised this as much as Mary. He noted the change both in her demeanour and appearance. She seemed older but stronger. The intense anxiety was gone. Mary's mission had been accomplished, and she was back in business with a straight road in front and the strength to travel it.

Mrs. Ellestree's influence bore visible results. The well-cut frock she wore, with its dainty appointments of spotless cuffs and collar and its big bow-tie gave her a demure appearance. Daintiness showed from her neatly-buckled shoes to her well-brushed hair; and yet she was eminently business-like.

As she resumed her seat behind the files of papers on the desk, Cuvier's eyes rested on her appreciatively. Here was a girl one could talk sense to, who would not be hysterical or flippant, whose eyes met his with no embarrassment or provocation. He was not troubled with her sex, and yet he appreciated it.

"So you're back! Work seems to suit you."

Mary nodded gravely: work did suit her. After the restless strain of the last months, office routine acted as a healthy anodyne. There was so much to do, she could hardly spare the time to think of her personal sorrows.

For the first time she was tasting the joy of supreme power. The responsibilities of Berryfield's had weighed

upon her: now that she was at the wheel and felt the big ship moving to her touch, her confidence had returned threefold. Sanders was gone: and as often happens, left no overwhelming blank behind. She could set Berryfield's in order: it would be a hard task, but she had both the strength and capability to achieve it.

Wherefore the look of worry had disappeared: in its stead serious resolution had settled on the delicate features. The eyes that looked at Cuvier wore a comforting serenity.

"You have a cosy little room here." Cuvier glanced round with lazy patronage.

The "old Adam" in Mary was not entirely chastened. The recollection of her visit to Cuvier came back irresistibly.

"I can give you five minutes, Mr. Cuvier. My time's limited. You're a business man and I imagine you haven't come to Birmingham to pass remarks about my furniture."

Cuvier had sufficient sense of humour to appreciate the impudence; he was keen enough to discover in the minute following, that she meant what she was saying.

A woman had told him she was busy and had asked him to state his case without preamble. A young woman, seated in her own office, the head of a business rivalling his own.

Man is learning many useful if poignant lessons in this world of evolution. Cuvier's first impulse was to be furious: his second showed him the justice of her attitude. The humour of the situation lay in his own dumbfounded attitude.

Cuvier surveyed the girlish figure, composed, rational, intelligent, and struck his colours promptly.

"You're quite right, I've come to talk about a lot of things, and I shall take up more than five minutes of your hard-worked time. Firstly, I've to tell you

that you were right about Reich's process. The final test has been repeated with excellent results. It will sweep the market."

"Not for long. It's the best process in existence, that's all. It's a new method I admit; but it can be developed. When I went through Sanders' papers, I found he'd been negotiating with other chemists also. There are two or three working on Reich's lines; I've secured all of them. There's one exceptionally clever young fellow from the School of Mines whom I'm putting in charge of our laboratories. Your patent's excellent at present, but the value of no patent lasts indefinitely, especially when it is followed up as we shall follow yours."

"I should like you for a partner, Miss van Heyten. You have a man's pluck."

"I don't find men particularly plucky. It's a quality that is fairly equally distributed among humanity. Perhaps you haven't the time to read history."

Mary put down the ruler she was playing with: she was getting weary of the masculine mind which made a corner of the virtues and allotted those to woman which would enable her to worship more completely.

Mary possessed the full average share of human intelligence: Convention might suppress it in a drawing-room, but in an office, she found intelligence, whether male or female, was of precisely the same value.

After the long rest and change of thought, she had returned to work to find her faculties of organisation, her method, and her purpose of action keener than before: human experience had broadened her grasp of vision and power of control. The responsibilities she had had to shoulder, and had successfully fulfilled, had helped her courage.

Above all, the sense of loneliness was gone. Though she never saw him again, she belonged to the man she

loved, as he belonged to her. They were in opposing forces; but they fought together. She knew he would take pride and joy in her success; just as she would glory in his accomplishment. Both loyal to their trust, they battled; but the bitterness had vanished. They fought for a mutual cause: loyalty. Feeling these things, Mary did not show the pleasure of a weakling who is patted on the back for showing any trace of stamina. She had courage; she had strength; she had capability.

Admiration of these qualities, when it was accompanied by astonishment that a woman could possess them, struck as an insult to her sex. Mary possessed indeed the quality of loyalty.

Again Cuvier experienced the baffling sensation of having set out to show kindness to an inferior and finding himself confronted by an equal. He retorted somewhat inconsequently . . .

"I hear you wanted Mrs. Ellestree's address."

"Yes. Fortunately Mr. Cobb would not give it me. You see, he is stronger than I am."

Cuvier could not help thinking that any man would be lucky who could inspire the light that flashed from Mary's eyes. Once on a time he had thought her hard: now he knew her to be only strong.

"I am glad to see we agree on one point; not on Cobb's superior strength, that I would scarcely grant; his quality of strength may be slightly different from yours, but I would trust you as I trust Cobb. The point where we agree is in our appreciation of him."

"He ought to appreciate you." Mary could be generous also. The look of gratitude she bestowed on Cuvier was very pretty.

"I'm afraid he over-estimates what I have done: certainly, it is not worth the sacrifices which I learn he proposes making—a sacrifice which involves the happiness of some one else, some one for whom I believe I once said I had come to feel an unwilling

respect, and for whom at the present moment I am feeling a genuine friendship. That is why I have come here, if you think you can spare me say—ten minutes!”

“Oh, please!” Mary’s weapons had fallen all together. Flushing, trembling, she lifted eyes in which no defiance lingered. She was in the presence of the man whom Cobb loved as he loved honour; the man who had lifted him from miserable drudgery and given him companionship and a fitting place in the world. This man loved Cobb as she did, and would not take his sacrifice.

“He surely didn’t tell you!”

“My dear girl, he has not the faintest idea I know. I overheard a few words between him and an impetuous young man to whom Cobb did not seem sympathetic. Mrs. Ellestree’s brother.”

“Ferroll! What was he doing with Mr. Cobb?”

“Trying to bring you together in the most hopelessly inefficient manner I have ever witnessed. I am a believer in a man as an administrator, but I am forced to admit he sometimes shows a lack of tact. I stopped his efforts by making a quick entry, as I have a constitutional dislike to duels in my office.”

“How *dare* he? Oh, what *did* he say?” Mary clasped her hands in anguished helplessness.

Cuvier laughed outright.

“Everything to justify your agitation. He was acting on the assumption that to be in love a man must be the slave of his emotions. He didn’t know Cobb as you and I know him. Knowing him as we do, we know the abstract duties come before his personal desires, however strong they are. I think they are very strong.”

“What have you come for, Mr. Cuvier?”

“To ask your help.”

“Do you mean you want the rivalry between Cuvier’s and Berryfield’s to stop?”

"No. I offered you a share in the patent. You refused me. You mustn't refuse Cobb."

"Are you taking him into the firm?"

"No. I am putting him out of it—with a half-share of the patent as compensation for his services."

"He will never take it."

"Oh yes, he will. But he mustn't know why I'm offering it. I shall put some one in his place and buy him out . . . I'll find a good excuse . . . Cobb knows too much about my private life for me to care to keep him . . . something of that sort. He won't be surprised. He's used to seeing me turn off people when I'm done with them. Then you must be in difficulties and ask him to help you. He will be feeling sore with me. He will join you without a twinge of conscience. The only thing I ask is that for his sake—for both your sakes—you will never let him know."

"No!"

Mary had risen.

"I couldn't lie to him. I couldn't have a secret from him. I couldn't build up everything upon deceit."

"You are very severe."

"Oh no! D'you think I don't appreciate your offer? It's most generous! But it wouldn't work. One can't run straight unless one starts on an honest, open footing. Mr. Cuvier, I don't feel enmity to you. Why should we fight. Why couldn't Cobb remain your partner? Why not . . . ?"

"Combine?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's such an absurdly simple and sensible solution that I never should have imagined you'd have agreed to it. After all, think of the abuse you . . ."

"But this is business."

"I think Cobb will come to the Birmingham branch."

Mary had the grace to blush: but her eyes still looked at Cuvier's.

"Yes; my place must be at Berryfield's. I want you to tell Mr. Cobb everything. I want him to hear it from you. And then . . . if he feels like . . . coming in . . ."

"He'll come in all right!"

Cuvier put out his hand: Mary laid both hers in his impulsively.

"I said some mean things, Mr. Cuvier: perhaps you haven't had fair experience of women."

Cuvier looked down on the earnest little face, a troubled shadow lay across the frank grey eyes.

"Perhaps not," he said slowly. "They say people get what they ask. You get respect from us: and trust: and liking, too. It strikes me when we want the best from one another, we get it, men or women, I'll make an admission too. I think you have the moral sense."

"Of course." Mary's brow wrinkled perplexedly.

"I said no woman had it. I have always thought so."

Mary hesitated for a moment: she did not want to assume superiority, to trade upon her triumph. Yet the sense of loyalty drove her to champion her sex. She returned Cuvier's gaze with her customary gravity.

"Have you ever looked for it?"

Cuvier was silent. Suddenly the memory of all that Woman had suffered with such patience through the centuries rushed over Mary in an overwhelming tide. Her physical weakness which hindered bodily rebellion; the supremacy of her emotions which were at once her undoing, because of man's misuse of what she had to give, and her strength, in helping her to endure and to forgive; her emotions which made her the prey of the sensualist, yet for the development of which her whole training was arranged; her lack

of resource; her mentality, her interests, all being forced into the one channel—the development of her womanhood from the purely sexual point of view. Morality was taught to her through chastity; that was the supreme virtue: unselfishness, forbearance and obedience the accompanying ideals which should deliver her wholly into man's power when the law of marriage was complied with. Not independent self-respect, not the development of her spiritual and intellectual possibilities, not the sense of responsibility to, and kinship with, her fellow creatures—men and women. No. All her thoughts and energies must be concentrated on keeping her body pure, her self pleasing, her soul a blank slate on which man might write what he desired.

What did he desire from her? Purity sometimes, for his epicurean refreshment. Obscenity often and often, for the satisfaction of his grossest instincts. It was held the worst sin of all sins if he degraded manhood: it was merely "natural instinct" if he degraded womanhood.

And yet, how man's ideals for himself strengthened and upheld him! Even while she shuddered from Cuvier's cynical belief in woman's purpose, she realised his force of character. With men, with those he recognised as equals, he was just, honourable, ungrasping, worthy of their respect and trust. Why should he view woman as a different species, beneath consideration? Her soul flamed within her. She spoke with terrible intensity.

"Or wanted it? . . . Or wanted it? . . . Or when you saw a glimmer of it, tried to help it? Granting we are weaker, granting our sense of sex is stronger, is not yours the responsibility? We were made for your helpmate and companion, have you no responsibility towards *us*? Should you not help *us*? When we are trying after our ideals of self-respect and dignity and honourable independence, should you

not encourage us to try? Not hate our striving? Not beat us back with laughter? If you felt the responsibility the strong should feel to those dependent on them, should you not welcome our endeavour after your ideals; not say they are for you alone; that our ideals must be only those which make us more dependent on your strength, more obedient, more worshipping of your superiority."

A girl no longer spoke. Mary had passed through fire. A woman looked at the apotheosis of man's strength and man's brutality; a woman who realised at once the splendour and the meanness of such manhood, and pleaded passionately as if womanhood surged behind her, helpless, trusting to her championship.

The sense of justice in Cuvier realised, if not Mary's entire point of view, something of it. He had not helped Susan Ellestree: instead, the achievement of her complete moral degradation had been his ambition. He had battled against the glimmering of moral sense, fought for its extinction. Suddenly he realised the unworthiness of the struggle, the shame of such a triumph. He felt, and, therefore, could say little.

"Do you know, you've almost made me feel a sense of conscience."

"Oh, you could help us so much if you only wanted to. Woman gives men what they ask from her. Want great things: she will give them to you."

"Can she?"

"I have given two men what they asked from me."

Mary spoke quite simply: there was no pride in the answer. Mr. Berryfield had expected her to uphold his trust: she had not failed him. Cobb had expected her to face renunciation bravely: she had done so. She had not yielded to Ferroll's need: she had chosen another path: she had the right to do that.

Cuvier looking at the slight form and steadfast eyes, felt something nearer akin to reverence than had ever come into his mind before. Dimly he realised that there were potentialities in woman: that there was a spiritual companionship, as well as the companionship which is purely animal; and that failing this, he had lost something worth having. More: he realised that if Susan Ellestree had been strong in her independence, her sense of responsibility towards her nobler self, she might have wakened something in him which would have satisfied her better than the mere gratification of her passion ever could have done: something that would have brought him finer and more lasting satisfaction also. That "something" had stirred in both of them, only they had shut their souls against it. It had stirred more actively in her and his hand had cruelly suppressed it, even though his judgment felt a secret respect for her struggle. It was that "something" which had embittered passion for them both; which had irritated him even in his desire; which had stabbed the woman's heart and left it aching.

If he had so helped her? She was worth helping. *"I am worth more than that."*

Mary had wakened conscience. The process was destined to continue and to work out punishment. He had been given strength, and had used it as a coward uses it, taking unfair advantage of the helplessness of those whom Nature and their training had placed at his mercy. Not an heroic battle: not a line of glorious victories.

These thoughts were only seeded in his consciousness: at this moment he only felt a sense of respect for the girl who had faced him with such true courage. He looked at her curiously.

"Who taught you all these things?"

Mary flushed a little.

"I don't know," said she. "Life, I think. I was

just thrown into the middle of it, and had to work things out. I never was taught anything till I met Mrs. Ellestree, and then . . .” She hesitated, then spoke slowly, “Then I learnt some things, but not the important things, only the fringe of them. I think the mistake is that the trivial things of life are considered the important ones for women; and the important things are only considered of importance for men. Whereas we are all human, we all have souls, and . . .” She paused, her brows deep knit. “And the moral sense, the same moral sense,” she said, “only our moral sense is obscured by your teaching.”

Her eyes sought Cuvier’s, looking up at them, almost pitifully.

He took her hands in his, and held them a moment very gently.

“I’ve learnt important things to-day,” said he. “Miss van Heyten, I’d like to feel you believe that I mean what I say. And look here . . . you mustn’t judge all men by me.”

“Oh, no.” Mary released her hands with an unconscious sigh of thankfulness. “The men here aren’t like you. At least . . .” Even now she hesitated: then spoke wistfully, “But they’re all a little like you in their point of view. They’re not so brutal or so honest, so we don’t notice it so much; but you all start from the same point: you’ve gone further . . . much further.”

“We’re men,” said Cuvier: the faintest tinge of a smile hovered near his mouth. “And some women like being women: on the whole, they accept the position with remarkable forbearance.”

“Those whom you want,” said Mary. “It’s the others . . .” She stopped. Discussion was so hopeless. And there was work to be done . . . work, with the man she loved to help her.

The tension of her mood relaxed. At least she

owed gratitude to Cuvier for his visit here. They were about to become allies. In business, she would find no fault with him.

She drew a long breath and spoke more easily.

"Mr. Berryfield used to say, 'When you've made a mistake, own it,' " she said simply. "We made a mistake about you. Do you know what was Mr. Berryfield's ambition, the ambition that he left to me. To overtake, usurp, and wipe out Cuvier's as Cuvier's. Well, it's going to be Cuvier & Berryfield."

Then Cuvier was guilty of the only act of gallantry he had ever perpetrated in his life.

"Berryfield & Cuvier," said he.

Yet as the train bore him up to London, the smile died from his face. Not only had Mary's words struck home. He knew he should miss Cobb—miss him stupendously. The boy's allegiance had given him a curious sense of *raison d'être*. He was the only human being towards whom Cuvier had ever extended a tentacle of dependence and affection. Cobb knew his temperament, his tastes, his methods: the keen young brain worked on the same lines with his, only Cobb took care of all details. Yes: he would miss him.

He lay back smoking: things passed in review before him, then he stretched his hand out opening and shutting it, once, twice, thrice.

"Each time one renounces, masters an emotion, breaks a tie, one gains something. Wherefore—farewell Cobb!"

CHAPTER XXV

"Who knows what's best for us?"

BROWNING.

THE swing-doors revolved unceasingly. Visitors passed in and out with monotonous regularity; they came up the stairs from the dining-rooms; down the stairs from the bedrooms and private rooms; backwards and forwards from the restaurants and lounges, while the telephone room and inquiry office were two centres of commotion.

An observer in a distant corner lounged on a settee in lazy enjoyment of the scene. It was good to be in London again, to feel the rhythmic beating of the city's pulse, to rest for a moment floating in the human stream, part of it, yet quiescent.

Ferroll had changed in the last five years. The impetuous currents of his youth were concentrating into steadier energy. As he lay back against the leather cushions, there was a quiet poise about his bearing which contrasted with his boyish figure.

He watched the panorama of the hall; the endless opening and shutting of the doors affected him hypnotically.

Then, out of the dreamy haze, one figure detached itself.

He rose to his feet with electric impetuosity.

"Mary!"

The woman he addressed turned, then with equal swiftness came towards him, her hands held out impulsively.

"I should hardly have known you."

They sat back on the lounge. Ferroll's gaze rested on her, puzzled, wholly admiring.

Marriage had developed the girl into a woman. Her figure was rounder: there was a tender grace about her movements which gave her a new charm. Affection emanated from her. Yet the authoritative air was there. She had distinction. She carried herself like a young queen, whose eyes were lit with love and pity.

Ferroll moved along the settee with an irritable gesture. He hated the man who had given her so much.

"So you've come to meet Susan too. I wondered if you would be here—why, what's the matter?"

"You've such a married look. Is your husband here?"

"Yes. He's with Mr. Cuvier. I had some shopping. We are only staying for three days."

"You're still in Birmingham?"

"Of course. We always shall be. Hayden's standing for the City Council."

Ferroll's lips puckered whimsically. Mary met the look, half-laughing, half-defiant.

"Ah, you must live in Birmingham to know it. Hayden's as good a citizen as I am, now. We love our city. We can't do too much for it."

"I think you're splendid. You know I always did." Ferroll's voice was dangerously appreciative. Mary's pale skin coloured, again her breath came quickly, again the old intoxication penetrated. Her eyes sought his, sure of sympathy. The words came with a sigh of happiness.

"It's so nice to find you're just the same; not even married?"

"I shall never marry." Ferroll's tone was confident.

"Oh, I hope not! I like to think of you as a happy

wanderer, whose mission is just to live to inspire. You inspire still, don't you? I can see it."

"Never mind me. Tell me about yourself. Are you quite happy, Mary?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"As happy as that?"

"Yes!" Yet she sighed. "Only when I see you the world expands so far. You always made me restless." A shadow had crossed her face.

"A noble discontent, though. You mustn't get into a rut. Are you very 'married,' Mary?"

"I'm very happy."

"Looking after him?"

"I have two children; oh, Ferroll, they're so wonderful."

"And has everything else gone? The business even?"

"No. We are partners! When I can't go down, I feel as if a brother soldier's going on with the battle, while I serve my part in looking after my babies and my house. But we talk over and consult each other about everything. It's a success."

Mary smiled back with a nod. Ferroll lay, watching her. His look was not wholly satisfied.

"The glorious independence has departed," he said at last. "You're no longer the girl who held the banner alone against the clamouring world."

"I don't know what you mean. I'm one of a firm now, not an individual."

"And all your interests lie in four walls."

"And in the homes of twenty thousand work-people. D'you know we've founded a garden city for our employees? Why that's an occupation and a purpose! And there's so much city work that must be done. Our interests lie in Birmingham, but they're not small or narrow!"

Ferroll recognised an alien note of confidence; he was not speaking to Mary only; Hayden Cobb's

assurance had infected her. She could not now be swayed as in the old days. Jealousy pricked at him. He switched the conversation brusquely.

"Have you heard much from Sue?"

"Not often. You saw her over there, three years ago. How was she? Happy?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think she and Tom get along a little better. Women take up a different position somehow in America. It's in the atmosphere. They have to learn to manage without their husbands. She seems to have lots of friends. I wouldn't say she's happy, but she puts in a pretty good time; a fairly useless one; I don't know if these clubs do much good. She belongs to most of them, and reads a lot and talks more. Of course the women don't count in public life. They have a funny imitation world of their own."

"Don't, Ferroll. I hate to hear you talk like that. American women have changed the face of the world. They opened the door which had been shut since creation."

"You don't mean to say you've any thought still for woman? Woman who hasn't met her Hayden Cobb."

Mary flushed at the satire in his tone.

"Of course I have. Because I'm happy, it doesn't follow that I don't pity . . ."

"Pity! Pity! Oh, my God, what a getting up-stairs and trotting down again! Sue pitied the workers and unmarried. Now you've joined the ranks of the smug sisterhood. D'you mean to say you don't know there are thousands of women who would cut their throats rather than be tied up for all their natural lives till death do part to a Pattern of Perfection."

"Don't! He's not. But I love him." Mary's eyes were blazing. Ferroll laughed savagely.

"Of course you do; and so you have the cheek to pity those who aren't so—what's the term—so

fortunate. Lord! The insolence of you married people. Mary, tell me honestly—we agreed we'd be honest—you must be honest—! Honestly, do you never regret your freedom for one moment, never feel the leash, never hear the big world calling?" Ferroll had bent forward, his lithe graceful form flung along the settee. Mary's face was turned away from him.

"Tell me, Mary."

Passion-laden, infinitely stirring with its memories, its tumultuous suggestion, his voice woke up the wander-spirit which we bury in convention, so deep, so deep; over which we stamp down custom and erect hard tombstones of Reputation; and yet, it is always there, secret but alive, infinitely, dangerously alive. Cuvier's voice had woken it in Mrs. Ellestree; now, after years of happy marriage, Ferroll, for one instant made it move.

Ferroll's hand touched hers.

"You have answered me! Oh, Mary, I've wondered often if we shouldn't have chanced it. You would have helped me so. You'd have been so different. I hate that settled look of happiness that your face wore when you first spoke to me. It means stagnation. At least you'd have lived even if you'd suffered."

"What nonsense. We should never have been happy. You said yourself you couldn't face being tied to me."

"Tied! Tied! No. But if we'd had the courage to strike out for ourselves, and live as we thought best for ourselves."

"We should have been doubly miserable. And what of Berryfield's?"

"Hang Berryfield's."

"It was my trust."

Mary's hands were clasped upon her knee. The look of infinite resolution had come into her face. Ferroll's eyes saw and his conscience smote him.

"I'm a beast. A beast! I can't help experimenting."

No, it isn't quite that. I respect you now as always, only it makes me angry to see how you can do without me, and how Cobb fills in the picture. It's just rotten human jealousy. I want to make you miserable."

Ferroll pulled himself up, rising impetuously. He had rammed his hands into his pockets, he rested one knee on the couch, looking fiercely down at her.

"You rouse the devil in me; and yet you make me strong. Send me away. Show me what a cad I am."

"No; no. You're only . . . experimental!"

Mary looked up at him divinely. A great maternal tenderness shone in her eyes. Ferroll realised anew her sweetness and her goodness. He stood looking down at her as at a lost paradise. She had gained so much in these last years.

"Do you hate me for having . . . spoken like that?"

Mary hesitated.

"Honestly!" Humour was near the surface. Mary responded irresistibly.

"No. You can't help it. Oh, Ferroll! I wouldn't change for anything, but I understand your joy in being free."

"We could have been free . . . together, if you'd come with me! I'd have shown you the world; the world instead of Birmingham."

Ferroll had neared her. His eyes caught hers, held them intently, strenuous, defiant. Mary rose with a sudden movement. Upright, and finely moulded, she stood before him, in her eyes the glory of her soul.

"I have a firmer grip upon the world than you," said she. "I have learnt deeper things than you can ever know. I hold something which you can never touch. You are without ballast, and so can be tossed about over a vast expanse of sea. I see where I am going and know the safety of my anchor. To you, life is glorious uncertainty. My certainty is just as glorious."

She turned her back upon him with a swift, decided movement.

Ferroll watched her ascend the stairs; he realised that one may not grasp every thing. He had tasted all things, and his zest of life was fading with its novelty. Each year saw happiness more difficult of capture.

He rose up and went out through the courtyard and into the crowded Strand. It was growing dark, and the lamps were flaming into brightness. The rumble of the omnibuses sang a chant of motion. The hurrying crowds tramped to a march of life. The busy city was doffing her robe of toil, and slipping imperceptibly into the veil of pleasure. The soft night air was full of whispers. The shadows throbbed mysteriously. Lights hung and flashed and flitted in sparkling intoxicating radiance.

The night and London called to him. He threw back his head with the old gesture, the smile of the vagabond on his handsome face, the pulse of the wanderer beating through his heart. To be alive in London on a summer night without a tie to hold one, for that night spelt happiness!

"The veriest gambler I,
Of all who cast the die.
The years to-day
I stake and play . . ."

sang Ferroll underneath his breath, and went forth to seek adventure in the hours that he must spend before Sue and her husband could arrive.

And meanwhile, in the shelter of her room, the girl who had chosen the orderly routine of life sat waiting for her husband, and thought of many things. For while life is a complex matter, it seemed to her that the same rules dominate, the same qualities stand for good and evil throughout humanity, queen or serf, prince or gipsy, man or woman. And the motive

power of the whole scheme is labour. She was in a very serious frame of mind when her husband put his hands upon her shoulders. She drew them round about her, resting her chin on them and looking thoughtfully into the fire.

"Dreaming?"

"No. Thinking real things."

Cobb stooped down and laid his face against hers. He had funny little boyish tricks. It was as if he found in Mary the woman's love he had missed all through his life. They completed one another in a wonderful manner.

"I've just met Ferroll."

Cobb's grasp relaxed.

"Oh!"

"It's quite a gathering of the clans. It was good to see him again. He's just the same. I'm coming to the conclusion some people ought to be irresponsible; they give so much pleasure by being themselves."

Cobb straightened up and crossed to the mantelpiece. He had realised Ferroll's fascination in their one short interview.

Mary looked up questioningly, and saw her husband's darkened eyes and laughed out, tenderly, yet with a radiant joy.

"I do love to see you human."

She bent forward, propping her chin on one hand, the fire light lit up her face; her grey eyes were dancing, a delicious smile lurked in the dimpled cheeks. Responsibility had been lifted from her shoulders, and she might breathe naturally and happily, joying in the simple things of life.

Cobb suddenly dropped on his knees before her, holding her in a grip that almost hurt. They were both astonishingly young, here in the quiet fire-light, alone in their own room. Love was so fresh to them.

"Oh, Mary I can't bear to think any man could love you but myself. Tell me you don't care one little

bit. Tell me you're not sorry; that you don't want any one or any thing but me."

Mary drew a deep breath of divine contentment.

"No one," said she. "Can't you understand that seeing Ferroll has made me even happier, if it were possible. He doesn't touch me now. Every inch of me is yours; I'm so proud that you are strong. I love to feel your strength, and yet—oh, my husband—it's so nice to *see* you caring. I like you to be jealous, not really jealous. You couldn't be, because you know I'm yours. But it's beautiful to feel you want me to be yours just as intensely as if I wasn't, wholly. D'you understand?"

Cobb nodded. He held her tight.

"You and my babies," said Mary, her clear eyes full of love. "And my babies because they are you!"

"Yes. They're safe hostages," said Cobb. "By the bye, that reminds me. The boat train's coming in to-night instead of the morning. I came to tell you so."

"Hayden! You don't mean she'll be here to-night?"

"If they get off by it; they ought to be in now."

Mary jumped to her feet.

"And we've been loitering here!"

Cobb put his arms around her.

"Steady on! I'm not going to spare you even for Mrs. Ellestree. How dare you call it 'loitering' when . . . I . . . wanted . . . you."

Mary emerged, flushed, laughing, wholly happy.

"It is perfectly ridiculous," said she. "When shall we stop being everything to each other? Even the babies . . . oh, my babies! They are everything too."

"Bless them," said Cobb. He tucked his arm in Mary's in a comfortable comradey fashion, as they moved towards the door. The corridor was dimly lit; they walked down it, linked together, two happy young people in perfect understanding.

A bell-boy stopped them. He held a pencilled note from Susan. She had come; and was waiting in her sitting-room.

"Let me go myself—just at first."

Cobb nodded.

Yet, though Mary hurried to the room, she paused outside. Memory sang loud of the last time when they had met. She pushed open the door nervously.

"Mary dear!"

Mrs. Ellestree came towards her with the old maternal air. In that first moment she did not seem to have changed at all. Yet, as Mary stood back and looked at her, she was conscious of a certain unfamiliarity. The air of superiority did not sit so well upon this woman. She assumed it with insistence; it did not ring true.

Was it she who had changed, or Mary?

"How you've altered, Mary." Mrs. Ellestree voiced her thought.

Mary's cheeks flushed slightly. "Have I?"

"Yes, indeed. You've become a woman, and a charming one. I always told you you had possibilities. What a blessing I discovered them. You must never forget I made you what you are."

"No."

"How forlorn and inexperienced you were when you first came to me!"

"Yes."

"Is that all you have to say to me? No and yes?"

Mary met the woman's eyes. Suddenly the tragedy of Mrs. Ellestree's assumption of authority struck to her heart. Susan was still holding the world back, still grasping at externals, still insisting on her wisdom.

She stood no longer on the pedestal. Mary's clear eyes saw her as she was: yet with the vision came a wealth of pity. Susan had staked all for man:

and lost. Lost as truly as if she had been one of the withered spinsters whom she mocked at. While Mary had hazarded no tittle of her soul, and man's trust and devotion both were hers.

Pitifully Mary stooped from her security.

"Oh, no. Only so many things have happened. I feel old. And you haven't changed one bit."

"Haven't I?" Susan Ellestree's lips broke into an involuntary smile. She cast a glance at the glass in conscious vanity. Her vanity was conscious now. "No, I suppose I haven't. Every one says how well and young I'm looking. America suits me. I'm a great success there. I love America. The men are so chivalrous. You can scarcely see my rooms for flowers. It's so funny to come back to our old-fashioned England."

"Are you going to stay long?"

"Only for a month or so. Tom can't be spared. He's frightfully important there. 'Mrs. Thomas Ellestree' is quite a personage. I always ought to have been a personage, you know. My *metier* is the personal."

Had she ever worshipped at this pinchbeck shrine. Mary felt a sickening at its triviality. To live for admiration, posing to an eternal gallery. Her soul revolted: but her heart ached. The admiration did not satisfy. She read that in fact in the hungry eyes.

"I am glad you are happy."

Mrs. Ellestree lit a cigarette, and sank down on the sofa, a whirl of velvet and of sable. She was sumptuously clothed. Mary noticed a hundred evidences of luxury.

"Oh, yes. I'm happier than I've ever been. It's pleasant to feel that one's a success as a woman. You don't agree with me, I know, but men do. How are you getting on? I've never asked after you or your husband. I must see him."

"Yes. He wants to see you."

Mrs. Ellestree leant back with a graceful, if conscious twist of her still supple figure.

"You're happy, dear, I hope?"

Happy! How could Mary voice her happiness? Husband and babies, the comradeship, the wealth of love and understanding were too sacred to be talked about.

"Yes, I'm happy."

"I hope you've given up that wretched business."

"Not altogether."

"I must talk to your husband. I'm sure he'll be on my side. Wifehood is quite sufficient occupation for any woman. You will have to come to see that."

Talk to Cobb about her failings! Suddenly a light lit Mary's eyes, so tender and so humorous that Mrs. Ellestree, seeing, felt a stab. The look was gone in a moment. Mary had risen. She stood before the other woman, looking at her with new-born tolerance and affection.

"We understand each other," she said gravely. "When you see him, you'll see that it's all right. I'll go and find him."

"Mary!"

The woman had cried out as she was about to cross the threshold. She turned to meet Mrs. Ellestree's eyes, appealing.

"You love me still?"

Mary hesitated: then yielded.

"Oh, yes," said she. "My dear . . . my dear . . ."

Mrs. Elletree put her arms about her, as in the old days. Then Mary released herself.

"I'll bring my husband," she said, and was gone.

Susan leaned her elbows on the mantelpiece, and looked at herself. The serene air had vanished with Mary's withdrawal. She held the mask up, her pride demanded that: but within, her heart ached tragically.

She read happiness in Mary's eyes: infinite cer-

tainty and trust. While she . . . she had grown more material and knew it. Romance had poetised her nature: with the loss of Cuvier romance had died, and hope with it.

Well, the externals of life were hers. She gained a certain satisfaction out of them. She was a social success: her gowns were copied: her gracious charm admired. Men hovered round her. She had grown even more skilful in the arts of flattery and management. And in America Tom's pre-occupation with his business was taken for granted. Oh, yes, life was easier for a woman in America. She was thankful she was returning.

The door opened: she summoned up the mask of urbane serenity and turned—to drop it forthwith.

Ferroll had entered. Ah, feeling had not died. Susan Ellestree's heart went out to the little brother with the old passionate mother-love. Brother and sister, that relationship would last for ever.

"Well, you're back again."

"Yes. It's all so strange. Everything's altered so: my place has gone."

"Not with me."

"You dear old thing! No. You're some one to cling on to still: but you're the last. Every one else has grown up. I've just seen Mary."

"Oh, is that it? Yes. She's married, isn't she? As a matter of fact, her husband is a fine fellow. I hate him . . . but still . . . I can't help feeling what he means to her: and she sees clear. Too clear."

"You were never serious?"

Ferroll was silent: then he nodded.

"Yes. I got turned down, good and hard. It's all right, I've got over it. Hearts don't break, these strenuous days?"

"Don't they?"

Ferroll looked at her.

"Why, Sue . . . "

"I can never forgive her, Ferroll . . . *never* . . . "

She clenched her hand with a sudden breaking of reserve. "Oh, when I saw her all the bitterness came back. She is worse than she was then: more sure: more righteous. She dares to pity me: to be kind to me: just as she did then. And when I look at her, and think what she took from me . . . "

"Hush, hush! Susan! You can't regret . . . "

"Oh, you don't understand. It was the way that I was saved. If I had given him up myself, I should have learnt acceptance. I should have been—not a happy—but a better woman. But I was giving myself to him because he needed me . . . God knows, it wasn't the material side of me that he called to . . . I would have borne humiliation . . . I would have starved . . . I would have suffered gladly. Well, I was caught up and put back into safety. Put back into my old life, with its meannesses and flash-pots. Put back, to stagnate, to sink down to the vicious comforts and materialism of respectability. The flash-pots have grown dear to me, because they're all I have to live for. They mean so much now that I couldn't give them up: but I could have turned my back upon them. Oh, Ferroll, I should have suffered, I know that: but suffering might have purified me. Now . . . "

"Yes. You ought to have pulled yourself out. If she could have helped you to do that."

"If . . . but she bought me from him. She killed my self-respect. Thank God, I'm going back, away from here. Three thousand miles will be between me . . . and the past."

Ferroll was standing with his back towards his sister, looking down into the fire. He spoke deliberately.

"Sue. Does it ever strike you that we wanted the wrong things from life?"

"I only wanted very simple things: the human happiness that ought to come to every woman."

"You didn't want children."

"My dear, how could we . . . in that flat!"

"That's it. You wouldn't make sacrifices. You wanted a life of pleasure . . . London . . . luxury . . . interest . . . excitement . . . you couldn't have had children . . . and a French dressmaker and face-doctor . . ."

"I would have borne Cuvier children if I had starved with them . . ."

"Yes. You'd have brought his children into the world without a thought as to their chances of happiness, poor little brats. Oh, Sue, don't you see it's all been self? You've refused to obey the laws."

"What do you mean by laws? Man-made conventions."

"No. The eternal laws: the great impersonalities that we have to abide by or be crushed by. Duty, responsibility, self-abnegation . . . Do you remember what Margaret Deland says? 'When personal happiness conflicts with any great human ideal, the right to claim such happiness is as nothing compared with the privilege of resigning it.' I've never forgotten that sentence. If Mary and Cobb had never been allowed to come together, they would have been happier in standing by their responsibilities than if they'd thrown them over for each other's sake. You said yourself, if you had struggled and sent Cuvier away, you would have stood on a higher plane to-day."

"Or if I had gone to him?"

"No. He didn't want your soul. You knew that. Your better nature held out against your desire. You yielded to self when you yielded to his power."

Mrs. Ellestree gulped back something like a sob.

"There's something in what you say," she admitted, then suddenly stretched out her hand. "Oh, Ferroll, I'm an unhappy woman. These things don't satisfy. But I suppose it's no good now. I'm too egotistic to begin to try. The stars are almost

out of sight. I can scarcely see them; much less, how to climb."

"One can always begin again: that's the glorious part of life. As long as one wants to be any better, possibilities open and open like the enchanted doors of the fairy-tales you used to tell me."

"It wasn't only self in those days."

"No . . . no . . . and I know that. That's why I believe still."

"I can only be helped by belief. I wish you were coming back with us."

Ferroll paused a moment: then he lifted his head determinedly.

"I believe I'll come. I ought to come. Good Heavens . . . after all you've done for me . . . Count on me, Sue. You can now. I've learnt things too. We'll start afresh . . . together."

"I wonder . . . will it be any good?"

Mrs. Ellestree leant her head back wearily.

"It's always good to try," said Ferroll. There was a curious light in his eyes. He stood with lifted face, looking outward.

"Endless growth," he said, "growth from the slough of our dead selves. Growth to the clanging of the drums of courage. Growth, with eternity before us, to struggle on, and fall, and pick ourselves up, changing always. Come along, Sue. You've heaps of pluck. Plunge in again!"

Mrs. Ellestree threw her cigarette away.

"And as a beginning?"

Ferroll laughed; then took her arm and pulled her up, energetically.

"Well," said he, "let's start with dining."

THE END

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